

THE TALES AND TEACHINGS OF HINDUISM

BY

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PREFACE

This book is intended to be used as a text-book in High Schools. It consists of two parts. Part I which gives an outline of Hinduism—its place among the religions of the world, its scriptures and its teachings—is for detailed study. And Part II which gives a brief account of the famous stories and legends contained in our epics and Puranas is recommended for non-detailed study. The author knows that the end of English as the medium of instruction in our schools is in sight. He hopes, however, that this book would continue to live through translations. For it would be an evil day for India and her civilization when boys and girls in our schools were allowed to remain ignorant of the purity and heroism of Savitri and Sita, the resoluteness and the indomitable faith of Dhruva, Prahlada and Harischandra, or of the earthly careers of those Great Ones whom we regard as divine incarnations.

Madras,
5th December 1947 }

D. S. S.

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PART ONE

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CHAPTER I

HINDUISM AND THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

I

There are about ten religions living in the world today and more than ten have died out. The living religions are Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. They have been mentioned here in the order of their age. Hinduism, it will be seen, is the oldest of them and Islam the latest. Hinduism had, in fact, been in existence long before any of the others were founded. No one can say exactly how old it is. Its earliest record, the Rig Veda, is considered the oldest religious book in the world. Some scholars believe that the date of the Rig Veda is somewhere between 2000 B C and 1000 B C. Others believe it is older still.

Judaism is the religion of the Jews. It was founded by Moses in Palestine about 1200 B C. The Jews are now scattered all over the world. They are found in large numbers in the countries of Europe and in the United States of America. It is out of Judaism that Christianity arose. The sacred books of the Jews form the Old Testament of the Christian Bible.

Zoroastrianism is now the religion of the Parsis in India. It was founded by Zarathustra in Iran or Persia. The date of Zarathustra is very uncertain. Modern scholars give 660 B C as the date of his birth. If this date is correct, Zoroastrianism comes after Judaism in age. But there are some scholars who believe that the date of Zarathustra is much older than this.

Shintoism is the national religion of Japan. It has no founder. The word 'Shinto' or 'Shin-tao' only means 'the Way of the Gods'. The followers of Shintoism trace their religion back to the middle of the seventh century B.C. But modern scholars believe that it is not as ancient as that. And some of them say that Shintoism is more a national cult than a religion proper. If Shintoism belongs to the seventh century B.C., it is older than Taoism, Confucianism, Jainism and Buddhism, all of which belong to the sixth century B.C.

Taoism and Confucianism were both founded in China—the former by Lao-Tze, who was born in 604 B.C., and the latter by Confucius, who was born in 551 B.C. Taoism is thus the older of the two. 'Tao' means 'the Way'. To these two religions, which had their origin in China, was added later a third religion—Buddhism which went to China from India.

Jainism and Buddhism were both founded in India. They may be looked upon as branches of Hinduism. The founder of Jainism was Vardhamana Mahavira. Strictly speaking, he was not the founder, but only the reformer of Jainism. Jainism is so called because it is the religion of Jina, a title given to Vardhamana. 'Jina' means 'the Victorious One'. Mahavira was born about 547 B.C. He was a contemporary of Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, who was born about 566 B.C. 'Buddha' means 'the Enlightened One'. It is a title given to the founder, whose original name was Gautama. Thus, the two religions, Jainism and Buddhism, derive their names from the titles of their founders.

Similarly, Christianity also derives its name from the title of its founder, Jesus Christ. 'Christ' means 'the Anointed One', that is, one who was sent by God with a holy purpose. Christianity was founded in Palestine in

the first century A D Jesus Christ was a Jew And the religion that is called after his name arose out of Judaism or the religion of the Jews Though Judaism is still confined to the Jews, Christianity has spread over all the countries and races of the world

Islam, like Christianity, also had its roots in Judaism It is the latest of the world religions 'Islam' literally means submission—submission to the will of God It was founded by Mahomed in Arabia in the seventh century A D It has now spread over many countries of the world

To these ten religions mentioned above some writers would add Sikhism as the eleventh But Sikhism is only a branch of Hinduism It is more closely attached to Hinduism than Jainism or Buddhism The Sikhs are only a reformed sect of the Hindus The founder of Sikhism was Guru Nanak, who was born in 1469 A D in the Punjab The word 'Sikh' or 'Singh', meaning lion, was a title adopted by Guru Govind, the tenth Guru in succession to Nanak Sikhism is practically confined to the Punjab and its outlying regions

It will be observed that all the living religions of the world had their origin in the continent of Asia According to the races from which they originally sprang, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Buddhism may be called Aryan religions Taoism, Confucianism and Shintoism may be called Mongolian religions And Judaism, Christianity and Islam may be called Semitic religions

II

Let us now look at the number of followers which each religion has Of the ten living religions of the world Christianity has the greatest number of followers—about

557 millions—spread over all the countries of the globe. It is the most influential religion now, as the powerful nations of Europe and the Americas belong to it. Next to Christianity in numbers comes Hinduism, with its 280 millions. But, as Hinduism is confined to India, its followers form a much more compact body than the followers of Christianity, who consist of various races—white, brown, black and yellow—differing widely in their customs and manners and in their outlook on life. Moreover, the Christian nations of Europe are divided among themselves and are frequently at war with one another. The Hindus in India, on the other hand, form a single nation, with more or less the same customs and manners, the same traditions and beliefs and the same outlook on life. Even with all their castes and sub-castes, they form a single unit of society, occupying the same country. Now that India has become free and independent, one can imagine what a powerful factor for good she can be in the world..

Next to Hinduism comes Confucianism, with its 250 millions. Like Hinduism, it is confined to a single country, China. Like Hinduism, too, it hates violence and loves peace and attaches great value to the wisdom of the past and the sacred ties of the family. If only the followers of Hinduism in India and the followers of Confucianism and Buddhism in China form an alliance, they can become a powerful group working for the peace and harmony of the world.

Next comes Islam, with its 230 millions. It is the fourth in rank among the religions of the world as far as numbers go. Islam was once a powerful and aggressive religion like Christianity at the present day. Though born in Arabia, it has spread over the whole of North Africa, Western Asia and parts of India, Indonesia and

China It is considered the most democratic religion in the world

Next to it is Buddhism, which has now about 137 million followers Though born in India, it is now found only in Ceylon, Burma, Tibet, Siam and parts of China and Japan

The other five religions have comparatively few followers Taoism, confined to China, has 43 millions, Shintoism, confined to Japan, has 16 millions, Judaism, scattered over many countries, has 11 millions, Jainism, confined to India, has one million, and Zoroastrianism also now confined to India, has only one tenth of a million

But in estimating the importance of a religion it is not the numbers alone that we should take into account Also, the figures given above, even if they are correct, may be very misleading Large numbers of men and women in many countries may nominally belong to one or other among the religions of the world, while, in fact they may have no religion at all What really determines the importance of a religion is the quality and substance of religious thought and practice which it has contributed towards the progress of mankind

III

Unlike many of the other religions of the world, Hinduism has no founder It is so called because it is the religion of the Hindus in India Both the words, 'India' and 'Hindu', are derived from the river Sindhu, the modern Indus In very ancient times the river Sindhu formed the boundary between two sections of a people called the Aryans—the Aryans of India and the Aryans of Iran or Persia The latter called the former 'the people on the other side of the Sindhu And they

mispronounced 'Sindhu' as 'Hindu', and this word was later adopted by the western nations to denote the inhabitants of India. We now prefer the word 'Hindus' to 'Aryans', because in course of time the Aryans who lived on the banks of the Indus spread themselves over the whole of India and became mixed with the earlier inhabitants of the land—the Dravidians and others. And out of this mixture arose a new nation and a vastly expanded religion now known as Hinduism. Hinduism spread not only over the whole of India, but also over some of the lands of Eastern Asia—Malaya, Sumatra, Java and Borneo, and others. These countries were for many centuries ruled by Hindu kings. Also, Hinduism came to have those two important branches we have spoken of, namely, Jainism and Buddhism.

IV

We call Jainism and Buddhism branches of Hinduism for various reasons. First of all, both of them were founded by two Hindu royal sages. Secondly, both of them emphasize the same set of virtues as Hinduism, namely, purity, self-control, detachment from the world, truth and non-violence. Thirdly, for many centuries the Jains and the Buddhists were regarded only as Hindu sects, just as Vaishnavas and Saivas are today. Even now Jains in all parts of India observe many Hindu customs and manners and are scarcely distinguishable from the Hindus. The Buddhists were also in the same position as long as Buddhism was confined to India. But Buddhism, in course of time, spread beyond the borders of India. It crossed the mountains and seas and went over to Ceylon, Burma, China, Japan, Tibet and Central Asia. It became a world religion and took into its fold men of several races. So its centre of gravity shifted

from India. The consequence was that the remnants of Buddhists in India were absorbed into Hinduism. Thus, from being the religion of a few Aryan tribes on the banks of the Indus, Hinduism, with its branches, has become a mighty League of Religions and the mother of civilization in the major portion of the continent of Asia.

We have already seen that Christianity and Islam arose out of Judaism, the religion of the Jews, just as Jainism and Buddhism arose out of Hinduism. But while the branches of Judaism have completely overshadowed the parent trunk, the branches of Hinduism have not done so. For Hinduism has even now a much larger following than either Buddhism or Jainism, whereas Judaism has a much smaller following than either Christianity or Islam. There are now only eleven million Jews in the world, while there are more than twenty times as many Muslims and more than fifty times as many Christians.

V

Hinduism and its branches, which had their origin and development in India, had a monopoly of this land before the Christian era. But now a number of other religions have also come into India and found permanent lodging here. These are Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Islam.

Christianity came to our country in the first century A D, when, according to tradition, St. Thomas landed on the Malabar coast in 52 A D. and founded several churches. Judaism also came to India in the first century A D, when, after the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in 71 A D, some Jews migrated here and settled on the Malabar coast. Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsis, came to India early in the eighth century, when, after the

conquest of Persia by the Arabs, some Parsis migrated to India and settled on the Bombay coast. And, lastly, Islam first came to India, also in the eighth century, when the province of Sindh was conquered by the Arabs in 712 A.D. Thus it will be seen that, with the exception of Islam, all the religions that came into India from abroad came with peaceful intentions, and their followers were eagerly welcomed and encouraged by the Hindu rulers. Even the Muslim Arabs who came with the peaceful intention of trading on the Malabar coast in the ninth century were allowed to settle down and become a part of the population.

As a result of all these migrations we have now in India followers of many religions. The total population of India is now nearly 389 millions. Of these about 286 millions or more than 70 per cent are Hindus, 91 millions or 23 per cent are Muslims and 6 millions or 1.5 per cent are Christians. The Parsis and the Jews are counted only in thousands. The former are about 100,000 and the latter less than 25,000.

VI

Of all the religions that came to India from abroad Zoroastrianism is the nearest in kinship to Hinduism. We have already seen how in ancient times there were two sections of the Aryans living on either side of the Indus. They had at one time a more or less common language, culture and religion. This common religion developed into Zoroastrianism in Iran and Hinduism in India. Zarathustra was a great religious prophet. He reformed the religion of the Iranian Aryans in the same way as the Rishis of the Upanishads reformed the religion of the Indian Aryans. There are many points of agreement between Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. Both are

Aryan religions Both had three castes in ancient times Both have the sacred thread as a symbol of initiation into a higher life Both look upon the sun and fire as symbols of Divinity Both believe in worship of ancestral spirits Both look upon the cow as a sacred animal

VII

Of all the religions of the world Buddhism Christianity and Islam are generally regarded as missionary religions There is no doubt that these religions have shown great missionary zeal in historical times Christianity is showing it today more than others But it should not be forgotten that Hinduism also was once a missionary religion Without missionary zeal how could it have spread over the whole of India from its original home on the banks of the Indus? Without making conversions how could it have absorbed all the innumerable hordes of foreign tribes which poured into India through the north western passes? Without re conversions how could it have absorbed large numbers of Buddhists and Jains who once inhabited this country? The fact is that Hinduism in its days of growth and vigour converted not merely individuals but whole tribes and nations And there is no reliable evidence that it ever used force or guile in taking men into its fold It is only in its days of weakness that Hinduism ceased to make conversions and even remained a passive spectator when its followers were taken away to other religions by force or guile Of course we Hindus believe that all religions are branches of the same tree that the same sap flows through them all and that they put forth the same leaves and flowers though the size and shape of the branches may be different This is the view which we took almost at the beginning of our history in Vedic times and which the world is now slowly beginning

to accept. But this need not prevent us from welcoming into our fold those who love our religion and want to adopt it. It certainly should not prevent us from taking back those who were taken away from us and want to return to us. For it is foolish to allow the followers of other religions to make conversions among our people and ourselves refuse to make conversions or re-conversions. We should never be aggressive, nor use unfair means. But we should be able to defend ourselves against the aggression and the unfair means of others.

VIII

We have said above that Hinduism in its days of vigour converted whole tribes and nations into Hindus, but that in its days of weakness it refused to make conversions. Every religion with a long history has thus its periods of strength and its periods of weakness. In the history of Hinduism, the periods which produced the Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Puranas or the Philosophical Sutras, or teachers like Sankara and Ramanuja or Ramananda and Chaitanya, are periods of strength and the intervening periods which produced neither great works nor great men are periods of weakness. We may say that the second half of the eighteenth century and considerable part of the nineteenth century formed one of the worst periods of depression in our religious history. But, fortunately, the tide has turned, and we are now living in a period of expansion. If we compare the present state of Hindu society with that a hundred years ago, we shall see the truth of this statement. A hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago, Hindu society was in a very stagnant condition. It had fettered itself with a thousand restrictions and had come to look upon all its bad and cruel customs

as the laws of God. But from the time of the great reformer Ram Mohun Roy we have been slowly freeing ourselves from our chains and emerging from darkness into light. The work of Ram Mohun Roy has been continued by Swami Dīyananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. Today for instance the cruel custom of Sati has become an incredible thing of the past. Child marriages have become illegal. Polygamy has become rare. Women are being educated and given equal status in all spheres of life. Foreign travel has become very common. The caste system has lost its rigidity. Inter dining is permitted and inter caste marriages are taking place. And owing to the exertions of Mahatma Gandhi the blot of untouchability is being removed. Thus in every direction our society is marching forward. Moreover, Hinduism has been reinterpreted by teachers like Swami Vivekananda and Professor Radhakrishnan in the light of modern knowledge. Its essentials have been separated from non essentials. The Bhagavad Gita and the Vedanta Philosophy have once more come to the forefront and are shaping the lives of men. And modern saints like Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sri Ramana Maharshi and Mahatma Gandhi have shown to the world what Hinduism is still capable of. Our religion has thus once more entered on a period of growth and expansion. It is now able to maintain its ground and ward off the attacks of its enemies. Every intelligent Hindu now feels proud of being a Hindu. He feels proud that he belongs to a religion which is the oldest in the world and yet is showing today the vigour and enthusiasm of youth.

We should, however, realize that, in spite of the tremendous advance of the last fifty or sixty years we are still at the beginning of many things. Our

greatest weakness still is want of unity. Very few Hindus seem to realize that 'united we stand and divided we fall'. There is no doubt that the caste system, as we have it now, is largely responsible for our want of unity. The caste system was originally meant to promote unity and harmony among social groups which differed widely from one another. Its object was achieved to a certain extent and all Hindus came to regard themselves as a single society. But when we lost our national independence, as a result of the Muslim conquest, our life as a nation became stagnant, and the castes which were once fluid became rigid. Ideas of superiority and inferiority took the place of unity. Privilege took the place of service. And internal dissensions sapped our strength. The greatest source of our weakness was the custom of untouchability. It is a monstrous custom, on a level with Sati. Mahatma Gandhi rightly calls it the worst blot on Hinduism today. We segregated a large part of our own society, kept them at a distance and subjected them to all kinds of suffering. We did not allow them to live decent lives as fellow human beings. And the worst of it was that we thought it was all a part of our religion. Our evil karma has borne fruit. For all Hindus are now treated as untouchables in South Africa, Kenya and other countries. So, the first thing we have to do is to be true to our religion, which says that there is a spark of Divinity in all human beings, and wipe out the notion of untouchability from our minds and give the present depressed classes an honourable place in our society. In fact, all ideas of superiority and inferiority among the various sections of the Hindu population should be discarded, if we are to emerge as a modern nation. All should be entitled to equal rights in all spheres of life—political, economic, social and religious. Until this state

of things is reached, Hinduism cannot be said to have overcome its weakness, whatever may be its achievements in other directions.

IX

We have said above that we Hindus believe that all religions are like branches of the same tree and that this truth was discovered by our Rishis in the Vedic period. A famous passage in the Vedas says: *Ekam Sat, vipra bahudha vadanti*. This means, God is one, though teachers give Him various names. Similarly, in a famous verse, the Avatar in the Bhagavad Gita says :

‘Howsoever men approach me, even so do I accept them. For the path which they take on every side is mine, O Arjuna.’

Similarly, again, in modern times, the great saint of Bengal, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, says that God is the same, whether you call him Isvara or God or Allah, just as water is the same, whether you call it *jala*, as in Sanskrit, or *pani*, as in Hindustani, or ‘water’, as in English.

Therefore, Hinduism has always encouraged the widest toleration in religious thought and practice. It has given shelter, as we have seen, to Christians, Parsis and Jews and allowed them freely to follow their own religions. It teaches that people professing various religions should live together in peace as members of the same family—the family of God.¹ But, unfortunately, this feeling is not shared by the followers of other religions. The followers of Christianity and Islam say that their own religion is the right one and that all others are false. We cannot, of course, accept this view. And so long as they hold this view we should resist their attempts to convert our people to their faith. It is the sacred duty of

every Hindu to resist every attack made on his religion by those who would not hesitate to use any means, fair or unfair, to spread their own faith.

Also, we should remember that, while Hinduism treats all other religions with reverence, it teaches that every man should follow his own religion. The Avatar of the Bhagavad Gita, for instance, who says, 'Howsoever men approach me, even so do I accept them,' also says :

'Better one's own Dharma, though imperfectly carried out, than the Dharma of another, carried out perfectly; better death in going by one's own Dharma; the Dharma of another brings fear in its train.'

All the religions of the world may be good and true. But, situated as we are, our own religion is the best for us. It has come to us with our mother's milk. Its rites and ceremonies, its stories and legends, and its beliefs and forms of worship are woven into the very fabric of our hearts. It is nothing short of violence to wrench ourselves from these and go in search of foreign things. Very often such violence results in spiritual death. The wiser way is to seize all that we consider good in other religions and gradually assimilate it to our own. There is nothing wrong in this. In fact, it is partly by following this policy that Hinduism has maintained its ground through all these countless ages. It has taken the wind out of the sails of all the religions that it has met with. It thus assimilated Buddhism in ancient times, withstood the onslaughts of Islam in the middle ages and has outlived the propaganda of Christianity in modern times. It lives and learns, and learns and lives.

CHAPTER II

HINDU SCRIPTURES

I

Every religion in the world has its own sacred books. Though religion really lives in the hearts of its followers and passes from generation to generation by word of mouth, some written records of it are necessary in order that it may be preserved in its purity. Otherwise differences of opinion may soon arise, or people may forget some of the essential things in the ancient teaching. For many centuries Hinduism lived only in the hearts of our people and passed from teacher to pupil through countless generations in unbroken succession. Modern scholars are astonished at the way in which the Hindus preserved their sacred books through all the many centuries during which there were neither writing materials nor even a written script. They consider it a marvellous feat of memory, of a kind unknown to modern times. Our ancestors preserved the ancient scriptures so faithfully, because they believed in them intensely and loved them more than anything else in the world. They regarded them as so sacred that to make a single false accent in chanting them was accounted a sin to be expiated.

But when our people advanced east and south from the Indus valley and spread themselves over the whole country they found it necessary to reduce their sacred scriptures to writing, so that their original purity might not be lost. Also, they found it necessary to produce many new scriptures for the purpose of explaining, illustrating and elaborating the teachings contained in the original scriptures. Thus, in course of time, there arose

a large body of scriptures belonging to different ages, having different aims and employing different methods, but all deriving their authority and inspiration from the primary scriptures.

II

These primary scriptures are called the Vedas. The Vedas are to the Hindus what the Bible is to the Christians and what the Koran is to the Muslims. The word 'Veda' comes from the Sanskrit root *VID*, which means 'to know'. The word *Vidya*, which means knowledge, also comes from the same root. The Vedas are so called because they help us to know—that is, they help us to know God whom we cannot know without their help. There are four Vedas—the Rig Veda, the Sama Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda. They contain the teachings of a great number of Rishis to whom God revealed Himself in this holy land. Hinduism has thus unlike Buddhism or Christianity or Islam, no single founder. We may even say that it has no founder at all. For nothing is known about these Vedic Rishis apart from their inspired utterances, so faithfully preserved by a grateful people. And, as these utterances contain eternal truths, we say that the Vedas are eternal and impersonal.

Each Veda consists of three parts—(1) the Mantras, (2) the Brahmanas and (3) the Upanishads. The Mantras are hymns in praise of the Vedic gods. They are prayers for prosperity and happiness. They used to be recited when the ancient Hindus offered oblations in the sacred fire. This kind of worship was known as Yajna. The Brahmanas describe how the various kinds of Yajnas have to be performed, what materials should be used, what mantras should be recited and in what order, and so on. They are, therefore, guide books for rituals. The

Upanishads are the final sections of the Vedas. They give the inner meanings of sacrifices and rituals, and reveal the most profound spiritual truths. They deal with such important subjects as the nature of God, the nature of the soul, the origin of the world, the aim of life on earth, the means of gaining freedom from birth and death, and so on. As the Upanishads come at the end of the Vedas, the philosophy that they embody is known as the Vedanta philosophy. As they give us knowledge of God and of the means of reaching Him, they form what is known as the Jnana kanda of the Vedas, whereas the Mantras and the Brahmanas, relating to sacrificial rites, form the Karma kanda. It is from the Upanishads that all our later systems of thought are derived. We may, therefore, call them the Himalayan springs of Hinduism.

The Upanishads are many in number, as each of the four Vedas contains several of them. But the most important of them are Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Aitareya, Taittiriya, Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka and Svetasvatara.

The Vedas thus form our primary scriptures. They are sometimes collectively known as the Sruti. 'Sruti' literally means 'what is heard'. Great Rishis are said to have heard the eternal truths in their hearts and revealed them to us. These revelations form the highest authorities of Hinduism. From them were derived in later times a number of secondary scriptures, whose aim is only to explain and illustrate the Vedic truths according to the circumstances of each age. These secondary scriptures may be classified thus:

(1) Smritis or Codes of Law, (2) Itihasas or Sacred Epics, (3) Puranas or Chronicles and Legends, (4) Agamas or Manuals of Worship and (5) Darshanas or Schools of Philosophy.

III

Our ancient codes of law were compiled by great sages like Manu, Yagnavalkya and Parasara. They give detailed instructions regarding the duties of a man according to his position in life. They teach what a man ought to do and what he ought to avoid. Their object is to enable a man to lead a pure life and reach God. The codes also lay down the duties of kings and rules for the administration of civil and criminal law, and prescribe hygienic measures suited to the circumstances of the time. Thus their object was to regulate the personal and social life of the Hindus in order that they might be united and strong, contented and happy.

It should be noted, however, that the regulations contained in them relate to the social conditions of a particular age. When these conditions changed, the regulations had also to be changed. As society grew from age to age, new codes of law had to be compiled by sages to suit the new conditions in various parts of India. Thus, Hindu society has ever been a living organism. It has always been adjusting itself to its surroundings. In the course of its long history, it has produced several codes of law, which have now fallen into disuse owing to changed circumstances. Codes of law are like the coats we wear for protection against the cold. As our bodies grow, our coats become tight and we have to get new ones. A man of twenty cannot possibly wear the coat he wore as a boy of ten. Similarly it is impossible for us today to follow the regulations intended for Hindu society many centuries ago. All that we can do is to follow the spirit of our ancient law-givers and aim at the unification and the strengthening of our society. Like them we should take steps to make all our people lead happy, contented and peaceful lives. And like them we may insist on regarding

spiritual progress as something far more important than mere worldly prosperity

IV

Next to the Codes of Law come the Itihasas or sacred Epics. These are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Every Hindu student knows their contents. A brief account of them is, however, given in the second part of this book for the benefit of those who do not know some of the details. In reading the Ramayana and the Mahabharata one should never forget that the aim of their authors—Valmiki and Vyasa—was to teach religion to our people and not to narrate history. Therefore, both historical facts and poetic fancies are employed in them to impress certain religious truths on our minds. It is, of course, a mistake to regard these books as pure fiction. But it is also equally a mistake to regard them as genuine history. The fact is that in these books both historical characters and historical incidents are taken as the foundations for lofty poetic creations of surpassing beauty. The poets remove the barriers that exist between animals and men and between men and gods, and make all beings mingle with one another and exchange thoughts. For instance, in the Ramayana, Rama's army consists of monkeys and bears. Hanuman is a monkey, Jambavan is a bear, Jatayu is a vulture—and yet they are very noble characters, far nobler than many men. In reading about them we consider their admirable qualities, not their animal bodies. Similarly, the poets represent wicked men as a race apart, call them Rakshasas or Asuras, and invent for them gigantic bodies, hideous features and often more than one head. And opposed to the Rakshasas are the gods, who are very human in character, but have superhuman powers, and who live in the heavens.

above. Also, for the sake of effect, the poets exaggerate things far beyond the bounds of possibility and describe incidents which could never have occurred in real history. And, lastly, as these poets lived many centuries ago, *their ideas of beauty, their sense of proportion and their notions of good manners were vastly different from ours.* Therefore, in reading our holy epics we should make allowances for all these things. It is only then that we can understand their importance in making religious truths concrete to us. We should never forget that their object is not to give us history or mere poetry, but to drive home to our minds, by means of history and poetry, the principles of our religion. Naturally, therefore, the noble characters that we find in these books have firmly established the Hindu Dharma in the minds of our people. The Vedas can be understood and followed only by a few. But the epics, which are popular illustrations of Vedic truths, can be understood and followed by all. Almost all of us get our earliest notions of religion from these popular stories. Every Hindu child believes that Rama is an incarnation of God and an ideal king, that Sita is an ideal wife, that Bharata and Lakshmana are ideal brothers, that Hanuman is an ideal devotee, and so on. These characters are more real to us than persons we actually see in life, and they have an extraordinary influence on our minds. Take, for instance, that famous holy character—Sita. She easily occupies the first place among the world's heroines. Her beauty, her self-sacrifice, her love and devotion to her husband, her courage and presence of mind, her dignity and sense of self-respect—all these and other traits of her character, as well as the sorrows and trials of her life, have made her the queen of our hearts. There is no doubt that, as long as there is a single Hindu alive in this world, so long will

Sita be a sacred memory. Similarly, Rama is for us the very embodiment of Hindu Dharma, and Rama Rajya the kingdom of God on earth. For thousands of generations these two characters, Sita and Rama, have shaped the lives of Hindus in this country. The same may be said of the characters in the Mahabharata. Especially the old Kaurava warrior, Bhishma, and the Pandava prince, Dharmaraja, are the best teachers of Dharma—both by precept and by example.

But the most important discourse on Hindu Dharma is the Bhagavad Gita, which is a part of the Mahabharata. The Bhagavad Gita is a dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna. Krishna, like Rama, is looked upon by us as an incarnation of God. But, while Rama is a man of action, Krishna is both a religious teacher and a man of action. The essence of his teaching is given in the Gita. We have already said that the Upanishads are the sources of Hinduism. The Bhagavad Gita is a marvellous summary of the Upanishads, given by the Lord Himself for the benefit of ordinary men. There is a beautiful Sanskrit verse which compares all the Upanishads to cows, the Gita to milk, Krishna to the cowherd and Arjuna to the calf. Therefore, if a student knows the Gita thoroughly, he knows all about Hinduism.

This famous discourse of Krishna to Arjuna was delivered at the beginning of the great war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas on the field of Kurukshetra. As the heroes on both sides blew their conchs and the clash of weapons was about to begin, Arjuna raised his bow. But, seeing in front of him, on the opposite side, his teachers, friends, and kinsmen, whom he was called upon to kill, he was overcome with pity. He dropped his bow and refused to fight. Then Krishna explained to him how it was his duty, at that moment, to fight, and

not to retire from the battlefield. He pointed out to him the sacredness of duty. Every man should do his duty without fear or hatred, trusting only in God and not caring for the results. In driving home this lesson into Arjuna's mind, the great Avatar explained to him in simple language all the essential principles of religion and morality. Though the Gita was addressed to Arjuna on the battlefield, the teaching is useful to every one of us. For the world too is a sort of battlefield in which every day we have to fight against various forms of evil, like untruth, cruelty, oppression and injustice. And very often we find many difficulties in the way of our doing our duty. In all such circumstances, we should remember the teaching of the Gita, namely, that we should trust in God and do what we consider our duty without caring for the consequences.

In the middle of this discourse Krishna showed to Arjuna his universal form to convince him that he was not only his friend and relative, but also an Avatar of God who had come into the world for the protection of Dharma and the destruction of Adharma.

Besides the Bhagavad Gita there are many other discourses and moral stories in the Mahabharata. There are, for instance, the long discourses between Bhishma and Yudhishtira in the Santi-parva and Anusasana-parva of the epic and beautiful stories such as those of Savitri and Satyavan, Nala and Damayanti and Sakuntala and Dushyanta. The Mahabharata is indeed an encyclopaedia of Hindu religion and ethics. It is often called the *Fifth Veda*.

The two great Rishis—Valmiki and Vyasa—may therefore be looked upon as our nation-builders. Our society is still following the lines marked out by them. We are still trying to follow the examples that they have

set before us. We think that every Hindu girl should be like Sita, and every Hindu boy like Rama, and that the brothers in a Hindu family should be like the Pandava brothers and that all public servants should conduct themselves like Bhishma and Drona. The India of our day may be different from the India of these ancient heroes and heroines. Our problems may be different from theirs. Our enemies may be different from theirs. But the spirit in which we have to solve our problems and overcome our enemies should be the same as theirs. We have to show the same patience, courage, faith and love that they showed. Also, as these characters are well known from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin, they serve to unite all of us together whether we come from the Punjab or Madras, or from Gujarat or Bengal. Every nook and corner of this vast holy land of ours thrills at the mention of the names of Rama and Sita. When Gandhiji travels throughout India and holds huge prayer meetings containing thousands of people, these two names serve as a rallying cry. The characters in our sacred epics thus serve the same purpose in our national life as our places of pilgrimage. They are common to all India. They are among the binding forces that make Hindus living in the various provinces of India feel that they belong to the same community and are a united people.

V

Next in importance to the epics are the Puranas. Their aim also is to popularize the teaching of the Vedas. They are also instruments of mass education. They also contain beautiful stories with noble characters. For instance, the beautiful stories of Harischandra, Rantideva, Prahlada and Dhruva are derived from the Puranas.

The Puranas are said to be eighteen in number. But the most popular of them are the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavata Purana. The aim of these two Puranas is to give an account of the Avatars of Vishnu. The purpose of an Avatar is thus given in the Bhagavad Gita:

‘Whenever there is a decay of Dharma, O Arjuna, and an outbreak of Adharma, I embody myself. For the protection of the good and the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of Dharma I am born from age to age.’

The Hindu writers of the Puranas speak of the ten Avatars of Vishnu. But there is no reason why the number should be limited to ten. In fact, the author of the Bhagavata Purana says in one place that the Avatars are innumerable like the streams flowing from an inexhaustible lake. Whenever man feels helpless and his civilization is in peril, or whenever he has to take a difficult step in his upward path, God reveals Himself in some form or other and gives him a helping hand. The Avatars of Vishnu are intended to help the evolution of life on earth. The first five of them—the Fish, the Tortoise, the Man-lion and the Dwarf—are purely symbolical. The next four are historical characters, viz. Parasurama, Rama, Krishna and Buddha. A tenth Avatar is yet to come. It is very probable that in a few years Mahatma Gandhi will be looked upon as an Avatar, if he is not already considered one. For if, as Jayadeva says in his *Gita-Govinda*, Buddha is to be regarded as an Avatar, because he prohibited animal sacrifices and taught kindness to all living beings, his natural successor in teaching Ahimsa is Mahatma Gandhi. And, unless mankind learns to give up the violence of war and accepts the Gandhian gospel of truth and non-violence, there will be no hope of the further evolution of man on this planet.

The work of the two great Avatars—Rama and Krishna—is described in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata respectively. But as the Mahabharata passes over the early life of Krishna with only a brief reference, the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavata Purana give a detailed description of it in their accounts of the hero. The description of Krishna's childhood given in the Bhagavata has had a tremendous influence on the imagination of our people and has given rise to thousands of songs, poems and dramas in all the languages of India. A brief summary of it will be found in the second part of this book.

An important point to be noticed about the Puranas is that they are sectarian scriptures. Already in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata we see the formation of the Hindu sects. These sects become more important in the Puranas. Some Puranas, like the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavata Purana, as we have seen, exalt Vishnu as the supreme God and describe His Avatars. Some, like the Vayu Purana, exalt Siva as the Supreme and describe His tapas, His cosmic dance and His gracious help to His worshippers. Some, again, like the Markandeya Purana, exalt Sakti or the Power of Isvara as the Supreme. Thus we see that, from very early times, there have existed three important sects in Hinduism—the Vaishnavas, the Saivas and the Saktas. There were also three other sects which have now faded away—the worshippers of Brahma, of Surya and of Ganapati. From all this we see that, though the Hindus look upon God as One, they take some important aspect or quality of His and make it into a person for purposes of meditation and worship. Thus Brahma stands for the creative power, Vishnu for the protective power, Surya for the enlightening power and Siva for the destructive power, while Sakti, who is represented as the

Mother of the Universe, stands for all aspects of the Divine Power. These divisions and sub-divisions are only for purposes of worship. All Hindus recognize that in reality there is only one Absolute Godhead called Atman or Brahman by the seers of the Upanishads, and symbolized by the sacred syllable 'Aum'.

VI

The sectarian spirit of the Puranas is continued in another class of Hindu scriptures called the Agamas. The Agamas are handbooks of worship. They give rules for the construction of temples, the making of images and the conduct of worship. They also give instructions as to what the worshippers have to believe and how they should lead their lives. Each of the main sects mentioned above has its own Agamas. The Vaishnavas have their Pancharatra Agamas, the Saivas have their Saivite Agamas, and the Saktas have their Sakta Agamas, also known as Tantras. As a result of the practical religion taught in the Agamas, the popular languages of India have been enriched with a vast mass of devotional literature—hymns, songs, poems, etc. Another important result of the teaching of the Agamas is the rise of sectarian systems of philosophy like the Saiva Siddhanta system among the Tamils of Southern India.

VII

The Puranas and the Agamas are intended for the common people. But there is another class of scriptures for the learned. They are called Darsanas. They are systems of philosophy. The word Darsana means 'a view'. Various views on God and His creation and man and his salvation were expressed by Hindu philosophers. And all of them were based on the teaching of the

Upanishads. These views were later worked up into definite systems of philosophy. There are six such systems—Nyaya by Gautama, Vaisheshika by Kanada, Samkhya by Kapila, Yoga by Patanjali, Mimamsa by Jaimini and Vedānta by Badarayana. Of these six systems, the Vedānta is the most important because it correctly and fully brings out the meaning of the Upanishads.

Every Darsana originally consisted only of a series of Sutras or short formulas. On these formulas elaborate commentaries were written later. These commentaries explain all the details of the system. Thus the Vedānta Darsana originally consisted of a series of Sutras known as Vedānta Sutras or Brahma Sutras. On them Sri Sankaracharya wrote a long commentary and established his system of philosophy known as Advaita. Sri Ramanujacharya wrote another commentary and established his system of philosophy known as Visishtadvaita. And later still Sri Madhvacharya wrote a commentary of his own and established a third system known as Dvaita. Thus three systems of Vedānta Philosophy were derived from the same Sutras. The authors of these systems also wrote commentaries of their own on the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita in support of their philosophies. Thus the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita came to be regarded as authoritative scriptures by all sects. They are therefore known as *Prasthanā Traya*. But of these three the Bhagavad Gita is the easiest and the most popular. It contains the essence of Hinduism and is acceptable to all sects. It is universally recognized as one of the greatest scriptures of the world. Therefore every Hindu boy and girl should read the Gita every day, get by heart some of its famous verses and be familiar with its teaching.

CHAPTER III

THE TEACHINGS OF HINDUISM

I

In the preceding chapter a short account of the scriptures of Hinduism has been given. In this chapter we shall give a short account of their teachings. Only a few general principles common to all of them can be mentioned here. After understanding them, every student has to read a whole scripture like the Bhagavad Gita for himself and learn the details.

The most characteristic feature of Hinduism is that it views all life as one. Plants, animals and men form *one family*. *God is their common father, and Nature their common mother*. The spirit of God appears as life in plants. It appears as mind as well as life in animals. And it appears as reason as well as mind and life in men. So there is a gradual ascent—from matter to life, from life to mind, and from mind to reason. A man is nearer to God, who is a perfect spirit, than an animal, and an animal is nearer to Him than a plant and a plant is nearer to Him than a lifeless stone. Similarly, a good man is nearer to God than a bad man, a saint is nearer than a sinner. From all this, we see that true progress is progress in spirit. A man is a higher spiritual being than an animal, a good man is a higher spiritual being than a bad man. The more of spiritual qualities a man has the nearer he is to God, who is the perfection of all spiritual qualities.

And what are *spiritual qualities*? They are goodness, truth, justice, mercy, love, kindness, and so on. The more we cultivate these qualities in ourselves and

promote them in others the more Godlike we become. Just as plants have come out of the earth, and animals out of plants and men out of animals, so the spirit of God is working in man to take him to a higher stage. We see in the world many men who are still near the animal level. They eat and drink, they hate and fight and have no higher life than that. They tell lies, deceive others and commit other sins and thus become even worse than animals. But we also see some people who are always truthful, who do good to others and who even sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. They are people who are marching towards God. Also at rare intervals we get men like Buddha, Christ and Gandhi, whose life is one entire sacrifice for the good of their fellowmen. They are men who have risen far above the animal level and reached the Divine. In every age and country there have been men who are more or less of this kind. They are called saints, sages, prophets or Rishis. They are the natural leaders of mankind in its slow journey from the animal kingdom to the kingdom of God.

Our progress in this journey should always be judged by our character and not by our birth. It does not matter whether we are high born or low born, whether we have a white skin or a dark skin, whether we are handsome or plain, whether we are rich or poor and whether we are men or women. But it does matter whether we are virtuous or wicked, whether we are kind or cruel and whether we are truthful or untruthful. If we are virtuous, kind and truthful, we are on the upward path. But if we are wicked, cruel and false, we are on the downward path.

We now see what the aim of our life is in this world. It is to develop all our moral and spiritual qualities to the fullest extent and become at last as Godlike as

possible. This is what we Hindus call Moksha or Mukti. All the circumstances of our lives—our difficulties, our sufferings and our fortunes, good or evil—are only the means provided for our spiritual development. Just as your dumb-bells, parallel bars and horizontal bars are the means by which you develop the strength of your body, so your difficulties and sufferings in this world are the means by which you should develop the strength of your soul. We should never forget that the aim of life is spiritual development and not becoming rich or powerful or even happy at the expense of others. A man may be a millionaire or the ruler of a vast kingdom, and yet, if he has no high spiritual qualities in him, he is no better than an animal. On the other hand, a man may be very poor and may not occupy a high place in the world, and yet, he may be rich in spirit and have great influence for good on the lives of other men. In fact, all holy men in the history of the world made themselves deliberately poor, gave up the world and became the servants of God in leading mankind nearer to its goal. In our country especially the leaders of religion, from the Rishis of the Upanishads down to Mahatma Gandhi, have been men who renounced the world and its possessions. It is from the example of such men that we should know the goal of human life on earth. They have taught us that the goal of man is to become perfect like God and to live in Him for ever.

II

But this goal cannot be reached in a day, or even in one life. A small boy or girl in the first standard cannot become a graduate in one year. The child has to go patiently from class to class, from the Primary classes to the Secondary classes, from the Secondary classes to the

College classes and pass the University examination before becoming fit for taking a degree. Most men in this world are like children in a Primary School as far as spirituality is concerned, and even at the end of their lives they are not much better. It is wrong, therefore, to think that their future life in another world will be determined once and for all by what they do in the present life. It is wrong to think that they will be led either to heaven and allowed to enjoy pleasures for ever, or to hell and made to suffer torments for ever. If a boy in the first or the second standard fails in the examination at the end of the year, he is detained in the same class and given another chance. If he fails again, he is given a third chance, and, if necessary, even a fourth chance, till he makes himself fit for the higher class. If we poor human beings have such patience and wisdom in educating our young, it is wrong to think that God who is the perfection of patience, wisdom, mercy and kindness would determine for all time the fate of a man by what he does in a single life.

Hinduism therefore teaches that men have not one life, but a series of lives through which they can educate themselves and reach perfection. They are born in this world or in other worlds, again and again and gather experience till they know what the goal of life is and reach it. This process of births and deaths is known as Samsara. According to the Hindu teaching on this point, the station of every man in this life is determined by the efforts he put forth in the previous life, and his station in the next life will be determined by his efforts in this life. His past determines his present, and his present will determine his future. It is one continuous process. There is a well-known proverb which says that as a man sows so shall he reap. This applies to all our thoughts, feelings and actions. If we think good thoughts, cherish noble feelings and do

virtuous deeds, we get a better start in the next life and proceed towards our goal from these. If, on the other hand, we think foul thoughts, harbour ignoble feelings and do vicious deeds, we go down in the scale of creation and suffer for our sins. This law is known as the Law of Karma.

The Law of Karma is like the law of cause and effect in Nature. Whenever you put your hand in the fire, you burn your fingers. Similarly, whenever you injure any creature for your own benefit, you become cruel in character. The more often you injure, the more cruel and brutal you become. On the other hand, whenever you help a man in distress forgoing your own pleasure, you become humane in character. The more often you help others in that way, the more humane and self-sacrificing in character you become. This inevitable sequence of cause and effect that we see in this life prevails in all the lives that a man has to pass through. If a man leads a life of violence and takes delight in injuring others, either in body or in mind, he is born in his next life with a brutal character. If, on the other hand, he leads a life of self-sacrifice and takes delight in helping others who are in distress, he is born in his next life with a virtuous character. What we are now is the result of what we thought and did in the past. What we shall be in the future will be the result of what we think and do now.

We cannot otherwise explain the great inequalities of life that we see all around us. We find one man strong, another man weak, one man good, another man bad, one man brutal, another man spiritual. We find some men born in a virtuous family which will help them to lead a virtuous life. We find others born in a vicious family, say, of robbers and thieves, who will ruin them by their bad example. God is not partial. He

would not of His own accord put one man in good surroundings which would make him a man of good character and put another man in bad surroundings which would make him a hardened sinner. No, the inequalities cannot be due to God. They are due to ourselves. They are the consequences of our own past. The qualities and tendencies that we acquire in one life as a result of our conduct work themselves out in suitable surroundings in the next. And new tendencies are acquired which again find suitable surroundings in which they work themselves out. This process goes on through many lives, till the soul acquires a vision of God and gets its moksha or liberation from the process of Samsara.

Some people seem to think that the Law of Karma implies that all our efforts are useless and that fate or destiny is all powerful. This is wrong. For everything is not determined for us beforehand. There are some things which are in our control. For instance, our wills are our own. We can use them for our good or for our ruin. Within certain limits set by our birth in a particular country, race and family and with a particular set of capacities of body and mind, we have freedom either to improve ourselves or to ruin ourselves. Suppose there is a farmer to whom a plot of land is given. The extent of the land, the nature of its soil and the changes of weather to which it is subject are no doubt already determined and are therefore beyond the farmer's control. But the farmer has still the freedom to till the land in season, manure it well and raise suitable crops, or allow it to run to waste by his negligence. Similarly, there are certain elements in our lives which are fixed and which we cannot alter, however hard we may try. We cannot, for instance, alter the colour of our skin or our parentage or our sex. But there are certain things which we can change for

better or for worse. Our knowledge, our feelings, our habits and our characters are things under our control. We can increase our stock of knowledge, we can control our feelings, we can form good habits and we can improve our character. In these things we are our own masters, we are not slaves to Fate or Destiny. If the karma of our past lives has set some unalterable conditions for us in this life, we are free to do good karma now and get better conditions in the next life.

It is wrong, therefore, to think that the Law of Karma fills us with despair. Far from filling us with despair, the Law of Karma, rightly understood, should fill us with hope. It teaches us that God is not a whimsical tyrant; that He does not put us amidst any surroundings He likes and that events do not happen according to any whim of His. It teaches us that we ourselves create the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Our own past actions have borne fruit in our present conditions, and our present actions will bear fruit in future conditions. It is a law of cause and effect. There is nothing arbitrary or whimsical about it. Hence there is no fear of uncertainty for us. An ignorant man is filled with fear when he sees a comet, because he thinks it is an indication of the anger of the gods and a forerunner of evil. But an educated man has no such fear, because he knows that comets and the like are the results of the movements of heavenly bodies which take place according to certain laws. Similarly, when we come to know that our lives are ordered according to a law and not by a capricious power called Fate or Destiny, we shall have no fear or despair. In a lawless world our efforts will be futile. But in a world governed by law we feel we are secure. We can shape our future by our efforts. When we realize that sin surely brings on suffering in the life to come, if not in this life

itself, and that virtue will as surely ensure our happiness and take us nearer our goal, we feel that our destiny is in our own hands. This knowledge fills us with hope.

The Law of Karma is recognized by all the religions that arose in India. It is common to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. It is one of the greatest contributions made by India to the religious thought of mankind.

III

We have said that, according to Hinduism, the aim of human life on earth is moksha. Man has to get away completely from the animal level and become divine. We have also seen that this goal can be reached by him only after a series of lives of right knowledge and right effort. But all the time there are also the demands of his body and the demands of the society in which he lives. These have to be satisfied. As long as we are imprisoned in this cage of flesh we are subject to hunger and thirst and other animal wants. And as long as we live amidst our fellow beings we must have some understanding about the production and distribution of wealth which will satisfy the wants of us all. And all this has to be done with the goal of moksha in view. It is only then that we shall have a complete plan for our guidance in life.

Hinduism accordingly does not stop with saying that moksha is the goal of man. It goes on to say that there are three other intermediate ends of life, namely, dharma, artha and kama. This fourfold view of life has given rise to the famous Hindu formula of Dharmarthakamamoksha. Let us try to understand what exactly this means. Moksha, as we have already seen, is the acquisition of the divine character by man. It is our final goal. But, meanwhile, on our way to it we have to satisfy the animal wants of

the body. These wants are expressed by the word *kama*, which means desire or pleasure. *Kama* stands for all the appetites of the flesh. And then we have also the demands of the society in which we live regarding the production and distribution of wealth. These are indicated by the word *artha* in the formula. How are these physical and social or economic demands to be satisfied? Should every man follow his own pleasures without any check or rule? Should every man, again, make as much money as possible without any check or rule? No, says Hinduism, for that would lead to chaos and the lawlessness of the jungle. *Kama* and *artha* have to be pursued within the limits of *dharma*.

Now, what is *dharma*? It is a difficult word to translate. Probably the best equivalent for it in English is the word Law. *Dharma* is *moksha* in the making. *Moksha* is complete divinity. *Dharma* is the form which *moksha* takes under human conditions. It is therefore half human and half divine. There is an element of divinity in every law. That is why going against any law, as long as it is in force, is a sin and a crime. But there is also a human element in every law. That is why it changes according to the conditions of time and place. As man progresses, his code of laws also progresses. But at every stage there is a divine element in it. Therefore it has to be obeyed. As long as any law is in force it should be taken as a divine command.

The Hindu formula of *Dharma-artha-kama-moksha* thus says that the pursuit of pleasure and the acquisition of wealth should always be subject to the moral law. This means that we should be temperate in our habits and never run to excesses and indulge in animal pleasures. Similarly, in acquiring wealth and property we should not use any unfair means or accumulate big fortunes

regardless of the poverty of others. Within the limits laid down by morality we have to satisfy the legitimate demands of our bodies and the needs of our families. Thus the famous Hindu formula gives us the proper direction for all our needs—physical, social, moral and spiritual. It is a complete chart of life

IV

Closely allied to the formula of Dharma artha kama moksha is the formula regarding the stages of life. The stages of a man's life are called Asramas. They are four in number. They are—(1) Brahmacharya or the stage of a student, (2) Garhastya or the stage of a householder and citizen, (3) Vanaprastha or the stage of a retired man, and (4) Sanyasa or the stage of a man who has renounced the world. These are the natural stages of a man's life and each of them has its own dharma, its own set of duties. The first stage, that of a student, is of course a preparation for life. During that stage one has to acquire useful knowledge and develop one's powers. The student has to strengthen his body, cultivate his mind and form his character. He should also know how to earn his livelihood with particular reference to the society in which he is going to live. Above all he should learn to discipline himself and subordinate his own good to the common good of the society whose traditions and culture he has to protect and improve.

Then comes the second stage when the student leaves his school or college, chooses a profession, marries and settles down as a householder and citizen. This is the stage when he has to put into practice all the principles that he learnt as a student. The most important principle he has to observe is that artha and kama should be pursued only within the limits laid down by dharma. He

should moreover never lose sight of the fact that dharma is a preparation for moksha. It is only obedience to the moral law that makes a man fit for salvation. A man who has led a reckless life setting aside all rules of morality, indulging in animal pleasures and acquiring wealth by fraud and corruption, cannot undo the harm he has done to himself by reading a few sacred books after retirement. If, during the second stage of life, a man has not built up a virtuous character for himself, he has missed the very end and aim of his existence. According to Hinduism, the virtues which a householder and citizen has to cultivate are purity, detachment, self-control, truth and non-violence. These may be called the cardinal virtues of Hinduism.

Every religion emphasizes a certain set of virtues. These are called the cardinal virtues of that religion. They give a certain individuality to the religion. Christianity, for instance, emphasizes faith, hope and charity or love. Islam emphasizes equality, unity and brotherhood. The ancient religion of the Greeks and Romans emphasized prudence, fortitude, temperance and justice. Similarly, the virtues which Hinduism emphasizes and which a pious Hindu has to cultivate are (1) purity of body, mind and surroundings, (2) detachment from the world, while at the same time living in it, (3) control of the desires of the flesh, (4) love of truth under all circumstances, and, above all, (5) non-violence, which is considered the highest virtue. When a Hindu householder has spent his active life according to these principles, he is considered fit for the next stage.

The next stage of life is called Vanaprastha, because at the end of active life as a householder and citizen a man is expected to retire to a forest or other secluded place and lead a life of prayer and meditation. He

should allow the younger generation to take his place and give them at times only his advice and guidance. This stage is, again, a preparation for the last stage of Sanyasā, when the man renounces the world completely and gives himself up to God or His work. Our sages have thus given us a map of life, clearly marking out the various stages and describing the appropriate duties to each. They have laid down for us the dharma of a student, of a householder, of a recluse and of an ascetic. It may not be possible for us in these days to put into practice every detail of the instructions they have left us. But we may be guided by the general principle underlying the division of the asramas. For this principle, like the principle underlying the formula of Dharma-ārtha-kāma-moksha, tries to make provision for all our needs—physical, social, moral and spiritual.

V

The demands of society on an individual are also stressed by means of another formula called Rina-traya. Every man is looked upon as a born debtor. He has three debts to pay—one to the gods, one to his ancestors, and one to the Rishis. He has to discharge his debt to the gods through sacrifices, worship and prayer; his debt to his ancestors by bringing up children and continuing the family tradition; and his debt to the Rishis by studying the sacred books they have left behind and by preserving and increasing the store of knowledge. A man who has discharged these three debts is known as an Anrina—one who has no debts to pay. The same principle is stressed in what are known as the five great sacrifices a Hindu householder is expected to offer everyday. The householder has to satisfy five orders of beings before he takes his daily food. The gods have to be satisfied by

worship, the ancestral spirits by libations of water, the Rishis by the reading of scriptures, the guests by rites of hospitality and the lower animals by offerings of food. These ancient Hindu formulas show what a comprehensive conception our sages had of society and of our duties to it. According to them, society consists not merely of the present generation of men. It also includes those who have gone before us, those who will come after us and those unseen powers that are around us and the creatures that look up to us. All these have their demands on us, which have to be satisfied. To the Hindus, all life is an integrated whole—from the highest God to the lowest vegetable. That is why they worship not only gods and men, but also a sacred animal symbolic of the animal creation and a sacred tree symbolic of the vegetable kingdom. They see the spirit of God at work in all orders of beings. It is to be observed that, among the religions of the world, it is only the religions of India that regard kindness to animals and plants as one of the duties of man.

It may also be mentioned here that among the bonds of relationship between society and the individual, Hinduism attaches special sanctity to three, namely—(1) the relationship between parents and children, (2) the relationship between the teacher and the student, and (3) the relationship between husband and wife. These relationships are considered sacred and inviolable. There are hundreds of stories in our literature which exemplify them. The life of the hero of the Ramayana is a perfect example of all the three. The way in which he obeyed his father Dasaratha, revered his guru Vasishtha and loved his wife Sita is well known to every Hindu child.

VI

But the unique feature of Hinduism which distinguishes it from all other religions is its religious toleration which is the direct result of its doctrines known as Adhikara and Ishta devata. Let us try to understand these two terms. Adhikara here means fitness—fitness to receive a certain teaching or to practise certain forms of worship. All instruction should be graded according to the fitness of the pupil. A boy in the third form, for instance, is not fit to receive the instruction given to the students of the B A Class. He is not ready for it. He has not the necessary mental power to understand it. So we say he has not the necessary adhikara for it. Similarly, an uneducated peasant in a village requires a simpler kind of religion than that which a philosopher requires. For his understanding is limited and his needs are different. If the philosopher's religion is prescribed for all, most people will not be interested in it for it will not touch their hearts. If, on the other hand the peasant's religion is prescribed for all, most educated people will despise it as mere superstition. Therefore variety of religious teaching and worship should be allowed so as to suit the needs of all. It should all be Hinduism, no doubt. But there should be different levels in it according to different sections of the population. Just as science is taught in one way in an Elementary School and in another way in a College so should religion be taught in one way to a rustic and in another way to a scholar in one way to a child and in another way to a grown up man. Let each man have the kind of worship and the kind of doctrine for which he is best fitted—that is the doctrine of adhikara.

Again though God is one, He has many forms and names according to the needs of His worshippers. All the gods and goddesses mentioned in our scriptures are

only the various forms and aspects of the one Supreme Reality. As the Veda says, Reality is one, the sages call it by different names. Some call it Vishnu, some Siva, some Sakti and some Rama or Krishna or Subrahmanya or any other of the numerous names with which we are all familiar. Every man is at liberty to choose the form he likes best and concentrate his mind on it. The form thus chosen by one is called one's Ishta-devata. When a man has once chosen his Ishta-devata, he should give his undivided attention to it and look upon all the other gods and goddesses as forms of that deity. In the history of Hinduism we find that even great saints and sages have had their own Ishta-devatas. Tulsidas worshipped Rama, Chaitanya worshipped Krishna and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa worshipped Kali—and all of them reached the Supreme.

It is on the principle of adhikara and Ishta-devata that Hinduism admits the worship of images. Many people find it difficult to concentrate their minds on their Ishta-devata. They require something concrete to help them. Images of the deity installed in temples specially built for popular worship serve their purpose admirably. They satisfy the needs of the worshippers. The great popularity of our temples in Southern India shows what a useful purpose they serve. Some followers of other religions attack us and say that we ignorantly worship stocks and stones. It is they who are ignorant, not we. They do not know that we do not worship the stone, but worship God, of whom the stone image is the symbol. Just as we cherish with love the photographs of our parents, so do we worship the image which represents the Ishta-devata of our heart. Sometimes we make even images of clay for temporary worship and destroy them with our own hands after the worship is over. It is absurd to say that in such cases it is the clay that is worshipped. One

may as well say that when people salute their national flag it is the piece of cloth that they salute. Just as the national flag stands for the nation so does the image of God stand for divinity. It all depends on what one thinks. Great religious teachers like Sankara, Ramanuja and Ramakrishna Paramahansa worshipped images of their Ishta-devatas and never felt that they were worshipping stones. When even such great men felt the need for something concrete in their worship, what can we say of ordinary people? And yet Hinduism does not say that image worship is essential. It plainly teaches that, if one does not feel the need of an image for worship, one need not use it. It even goes further and says that mental worship without any material image is higher than the worship of a material image. So there is no point in the loud denunciations of some people who say that idol-worship is sinful. Swami Vivekananda gives the proper reply to such people. He says that if idol-worship is sinful, childhood is also sinful.

If the Hindu principles of Adhikara and Ishta-devata had been accepted by all the religions of the world, there would have been no religious persecutions and no forcible conversions. But, as we noted in the first chapter, Christianity and Islam do not share this liberal view of religion. The followers of these religions believe that theirs alone is the true religion and that all the others are false, while every Hindu believes that it is a sin to call any religion false. We believe that God has revealed Himself in different ways to different races. No single race or religion can claim a monopoly of truth. No single race or religion is perfect, for religious truths come to us through human channels, and human beings are likely to err. So the followers of the various religions have a good deal to learn from one another. This is an important principle

which we should never forget. For it is based on truth, and truth is bound to conquer in the end. The world is bound to accept this principle one day. Already many thoughtful people of other religions are coming round to our view. Already it is being widely recognized that, though religions are many, Religion is one, just as God is one, though the gods are many.

Lastly, the glory of Hinduism lies not only in the principles we have enumerated so far, but also in the personalities of the Rishis and saints it has thrown up throughout its long history. Every Hindu ought to be proud of these holy men who have made India a Holy Land in the eyes of the world. He should make an attempt to know something of each of them. For they were, each in his own way, an embodiment of some aspect of Hinduism. We have, for instance, the Rishis of the Upanishads like Yagnavalkya, Varuna and Sanatkumara, authors of epics like Valmiki, Vyasa and Tulsidas, founders of religions like Buddha, Mahavira and Nanak, law-givers like Manu, Gautama and Parasara, philosophers like Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, lovers of God like the Alvars and the Nayanars of Southern India and the saints of Maharashtra, and the sages of the present day like Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sri Ramana Maharshi and Mahatma Gandhi. It is impossible here to mention the names of all of them, for they are so many. They are the torch-bearers of our civilization. It is in the light shown by them that we have to march on our way to our goal in God.

Having thus given a brief outline of the teachings of Hinduism, we shall proceed to give in the Second Part of this book a short account of the famous stories and legends through which these teachings were impressed on the minds of the people. - We begin with the well-known story of the Ramayana.

PART TWO

CHAPTER IV

THE STORY OF THE RAMAYANA

I

The Ramayana of Valmiki is a great religious epic in which all the incidents take place according to a divine plan. The poet tells us, at the beginning of the story, how all the gods in heaven went to the great God Vishnu and complained to Him about the intolerable wickedness of Ravana, the King of Lanka, in the world below and sought His help. Thereupon Vishnu, the protector of the world, promised that He would take a human form and be born as Rama, the son of Dasaratha, and would avenge the wrongs suffered by the gods and men. The poet further tells us that not only Rama and his brothers, and Sita, his wife, but also his followers who helped him in the destruction of Ravana were incarnations of various heavenly beings. The object of this descent of the unseen world into the seen was the establishment of dharma and the portraiture of an ideal man who was a perfect embodiment of it. Hence the Ramayana is for the Hindus not simply a thrilling romance but a religious epic and a sacred scripture. Every Hindu child knows the outline of the story, which is as follows :

Dasaratha, the king of Kosala, having remained childless for a long time, performed a great sacrifice to please the gods. The gods were pleased and out of the sacrificial fire there arose a radiant being, bearing in his hand a golden vessel containing celestial food. The king received the gift joyfully and divided it among his three queens—Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. The queens partook of the food and gave birth in course of time

to four sons. Kausalya's son was the eldest of them. He was called Rama. Kaikeyi's son was called Bharata. Sumitra's two sons were called Lakshmana and Satrughna.

When the children grew up they were taught all the arts of peace and war. Rama was barely fifteen years of age when the sage Viswamitra came to Dasaratha's court and asked the king to send the young prince along with him to protect his hermitage in the forest from the attacks of demons. The king consented with much reluctance and Rama, accompanied by his brother Lakshmana, went with Viswamitra to his hermitage and fought against the demons successfully. After this fight, the sage took the two princes to the court of Janaka, king of Videha, where Rama distinguished himself by lifting and breaking the mighty bow of Siva which no other prince could wield. Janaka was overjoyed to see this marvellous feat and gave his daughter Sita in marriage to Rama. Dasaratha came to Janaka's capital with his two other sons for the marriage and happily all his four sons were married at the same time, Lakshmana marrying Urmila, the sister of Sita, and Bharata and Satrughna marrying her two cousins, the daughters of Janaka's brother.

II

Some years after these happy events, Dasaratha wanted to install Rama as the crown prince of Kosala. Accordingly preparations were made. But on the eve of the ceremony, Kaikeyi, one of the three queens, wanted that her own son, Bharata, should be made the crown prince, and not Rama. The king had formerly promised to give Kaikeyi two boons for the help she had rendered to him in a battle. The young queen now insisted on having her boons. As her first boon she wanted that her son should be crowned, and as her second boon she wanted

that Rama should be banished from the country to a forest for fourteen years. When this was made known, there was consternation everywhere—in the king's household, among the ministers and counsellors and throughout the country. It was almost everybody's desire that the promise given by Dasaratha to Kaikeyi should not be fulfilled at this juncture. But Rama was very particular that his father should not break his promise. And he promptly prepared himself to leave the country with his wife Sita, who would not hear of being left behind. Thus it happened that on the day on which he was to have been crowned he had to leave the country accompanied by his wife and his faithful brother Lakshmana, who begged permission to go with him. This sudden change in the fortunes of his dearest son was too much for the old king and he died of a broken heart soon after the Prince and the Princess had left Ayodhya.

When the king died the ministers sent for Bharata who had been away at his uncle's court and who knew nothing of the happenings at Ayodhya. He now returned to the capital and was shocked to hear how his father's death had been caused by Rama's exile. He was furious when he learnt that his mother was the cause of all these misfortunes. He at once made up his mind not to accept the kingdom won for him by such unfair means, but to go to his brother in the forest and beg him to come back and be crowned king of the realm. So he went with a large army to the forest in the hope of bringing back the rightful heir to the throne in a solemn procession. But Rama was adamant. He would not go back on the word he had given to Dasaratha and Kaikeyi that he would lead the life of an exile in the forest for fourteen years. Neither the earnest pleadings of Bharata nor the various arguments of his followers could make Rama change his

mind. But Bharata would not, under any circumstances, sit on the throne while his elder brother was alive. So a compromise was suggested by the holy sage, Vasishta, viz., that Rama should come back after fourteen years and accept the crown and that Bharata should act as his regent during this period of exile. This advice was accepted and Bharata carried home in triumph Rama's sandals, placed them on the throne and himself acted only as their deputy.

III

After Bharata had departed, Rama changed his forest abode. He had a hut built in a place called Chitrakuta and was living there. Now he went farther south into the forest of Dandaka and spent most of his years of exile in helping the holy sages who lived in the forest settlements against the Rakshasas who used to come and attack them. These Rakshasas were mostly cannibals. They were a powerful race notorious for their magic arts, their sensuality and their wickedness. They had developed a powerful civilization in Lanka, which is generally identified with modern Ceylon, under a far-famed and wicked king, Ravana, at the mention of whose name all the worlds quaked in fear. It was Ravana's followers and agents that molested the holy sages in their forest settlements. So Rama, the defender of the sages and the champion of righteousness, was bound to come into conflict with Ravana. The conflict came at last in this way.

Ravana's sister, Surpanakha, an ugly monster, chanced to see Rama, Sita and Lakshmana near their abode at Panchavati on the banks of the Godavari. This sensual Rakshasi had the impudence to go up to the handsome Prince and ask him to make her his wife and discard Sita. The two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, were amused

at the shameless sensuality of this woman and each asked her to make her approaches to the other. When the monster understood the joke she was furious and in her mad jealousy rushed against the Princess with the intention of killing her. Now Lakshmana sprang to the rescue of Sita, cut off the monster's nose and ears but spared her life. The infuriated Rakshasi now ran howling into the forest, and the Princes thought they were rid of her.

But she went and incited her brothers, Khara and Dushana, who had been stationed by Ravana at one of his outposts called Janasthana with a large army. These Rakshasa chiefs came with their well equipped army to avenge the wrongs of their sister, but were quickly routed by Rama, single handed, in a pitched battle. Surpanakha now became doubly infuriated and ran to the King of Lanka and told him of the rout of his brother's armies. The wily Rakshasi further described to her brother the beauty of Sita so as to rouse his wicked desire and suggested that he might kill Rama and Lakshmana and make Sita his wife. Ravana actuated both by revenge and by lust, came to Panchavati with one of his followers called Maricha and devised a plan by which he could carry off Sita secretly without coming into conflict with Rama and Lakshmana. Maricha was asked to assume the form of a beautiful deer and attract the attention of Sita. And when Sita should ask her husband to get the animal for her, the deer should elude him and take him deep into the forest and cry 'O Lakshmana' in imitation of Rama's voice. It was expected that when he heard his brother's cry of distress Lakshmana would leave Sita and go to his rescue, making it possible for Ravana to carry off the unprotected Princess. The scheme worked. Rama and Lakshmana were drawn off deep into the forest and Ravana came and carried off Sita to his capital.

When Ravana reached his palace he tried to tempt the Princess in a thousand ways to yield to his wicked desires. He threatened, he coaxed, he begged, he promised to make her his chief queen and he showed her all the fabulous wealth which would be hers if she consented. The Princess spurned all his offers, spoke out her mind boldly and called the King of the Rakshasas a liar, a coward and a thief for having come into her abode in the guise of an ascetic during the absence of her husband and carried her off secretly. Ravana put up with all these insults, hoping that she might one day be made to bend to his will. He assigned to her one of the most beautiful palaces situated in a grove of Asoka trees in the royal enclosure. But Sita disdained to live there and chose to spend her time in fasting and prayer under a tree in the garden. She was closely watched by a band of cruel and ugly hags who never gave her any peace of mind, but always urged her to yield to the desires of their king. The only protection that Sita had during these days of agony in Lanka was the matchless purity of her own heart in which the image of her husband constantly shone like a light. It was this purity which enabled her to endure the untold sufferings of her life and made her come out of her trials in triumph.

IV

Meanwhile Rama and Lakshmana, on returning from the forest to their hut at Panchavati, found it empty and went about searching for the lost Princess. *Wandering from place to place, they got a clue to Sita's whereabouts from Jatayu, a huge vulture who had known them before and who had been struck down by Ravana when he attempted the rescue of Sita. Jatayu gave the news to the Princes and died at their feet. Rama and Lakshmana*

performed his obsequies and wandered south and made friends with Sugriva, the Vanara chief, who was, like themselves, an exile. For Sugriva had been cruelly banished from his country, Kishkindha, by his brother Vali, who had also seized his wife Ruma.

Rama and Sugriva entered into a compact by which the former undertook to overthrow Vali and place Sugriva on the throne of Kishkindha, and Sugriva in turn promised to help Rama to overthrow Ravana and recover Sita. This alliance was brought about by Hanuman, who was the trusted counsellor of Sugriva and who afterwards became the loyal servant and ardent devotee of Rama and Sita.

The Vanaras of Kishkindha are represented by the poet as monkeys in outward appearance with tails and claws. But they were endowed with extraordinary powers. Like the Rakshasas they could assume any form they chose. They had also superhuman strength and could fly long distances. And, above all, they could talk, think and judge and had a highly developed moral sense.

The agreement with Rama emboldened Sugriva to go and challenge his brother Vali to a fight. Vali was soon overthrown and slain by an arrow discharged by Rama, and Sugriva was placed on the throne of Kishkindha. It was now the turn of Sugriva to help Rama. He first sent out bands of followers in all directions to find out where Ravana had concealed Sita. The band that went south included Hanuman. He succeeded in leaping across the ocean which separated Lanka from the mainland and met Sita in the Asoka grove attached to the royal palace. He saw with his own eyes the mental torture the Princess was undergoing at the hands of Ravana and his minions. He made himself known to her and gave her the signet ring of Rama which he had brought

with him as a token of the Prince's message. This brought a gleam of hope into the despairing heart of Sita and she gave a return token and asked Hanuman to go back and urge the Prince to come at once with a large army for her rescue. Hanuman offered to take Sita on his back to Rama secretly that very instant. But the Princess, like a true heroine, wanted that her husband should come and slay the enemy in pitched battle and carry her home in triumph. She did not like the idea of escaping secretly from the place. Hanuman applauded her resolution and received the crest jewel which she gave as a return token. But, before leaving Lanka, he gave Ravana a foretaste of things to come by setting fire to his capital and destroying some of its palatial buildings.

When Hanuman brought the glad news of Sita to Rama and Sugriva, they made up their minds to march at once with their Vanara hosts against Lanka. The necessary orders were given and the army soon reached the sea. While they lay encamped on the beach and were contemplating ways and means of crossing the sea, Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana, came over to their side and offered his help. He had tried in vain to make Ravana give up Sita and make peace with Rama. But he was insulted and his advice rejected, and so he left Lanka and sought Rama's protection. He was welcomed by Rama, who promised to place him on the throne of Lanka after the defeat of Ravana. From that time Vibhishana became Rama's faithful friend and ally like Sugriva.

V

Rama now took counsel with all his friends and had a causeway built across the hundred yojanas of the sea that separated Lanka from the mainland. The huge Vanara army now easily crossed over to Lanka and

offered battle to the enemy Ravana till now had treated the Prince of Ayodhya with contempt and made light of his attempts to rescue Sita from captivity He had obtained from Brahma, the Creator, a boon that he could never be defeated by any god, demi god or demon But he had asked for no protection against man—a creature whom the Rakshas held in contempt And now that this despised creature, man, came against him with a huge army, Ravana began to make preparations for war and sent out spies to find out the enemy's strength Some of his aged counsellors advised him not to persist in his wickedness, but to make peace with Rama by returning the Princess But Ravana was stubborn and scorned their advice as a counsel of cowardice

So the war began with varying fortunes on both sides There were sorties skirmishes, night attacks, combats and pitched battles At last after a bitter fight and a great slaughter the tide turned against the Rakshasas And, one after another, their renowned warriors fought and fell Kumbhakarna, Ravana's brother, a veritable man mountain who spent most of his time in sleep, was roused and sent into the field But he was soon vanquished and slain by Rama Indrajit, the son of Ravana, a hero famous for his magical acts in warfare, followed suit And the turn of Ravana came at last The final fight between Rama and Ravana was grim and terrible The whole world of gods and sages and good men sympathized with the cause of righteousness embodied in Rama and prayed for the defeat of wickedness embodied in Ravana Indra the king of gods, sent his own chariot and charioteer to Rama And the great sage Agastya came to the battlefield, on the wings of thought, as it were, and imparted to Rama the secret of a matchless weapon to be used against the foe Thus equipped not only with his

own righteousness but also with the sympathy of the wise and the good, Rama discharged the deadly missile that goes by the name of Brahmastra and killed the monster of wickedness and put an end to his kingdom based on brute force. But Rama bore no ill-will to Ravana. After the latter's death, his followers were not molested in any way. His kingdom was given to his brother. And when Vibhishana asked for permission to perform the funeral rites of his brother, the conqueror replied in one of his grandest utterances :

'All enmity ends with death. My object has been fulfilled. Do perform his obsequies. Hereafter he is to me what he is to you.'

Hanuman was sent to convey the glad news of the victory of Rama to the Princess in the Asoka grove. She wept tears of joy and said she did not know how to reward him for all that he had done for her and her husband. Hanuman now offered to punish her cruel guards who had been torturing her all these days. But she said they were only the servants of Ravana and had only carried out his orders. 'We must forgive them now and not punish them,' said the high-souled Princess. 'It was my own sins that brought about my sufferings. The wise always return good for evil. There is none in the world who does not err.' Hanuman bowed to Sita, who spoke like a goddess in the moment of her victory. He thought she was in every way worthy of the Prince and asked her for a message for her husband. She gave him her simple message that she was eager to see her husband, not knowing the terrible experience that was in store for her at the meeting.

When Hanuman delivered the message, Rama bent his head and sank into deep thought, while his eyes filled with tears. But quickly controlling himself, he raised his head

and asked Vibhishana to fetch Sita to him with due ceremony. And when she came arrayed according to his orders as she used to be in happier times, he put on a cold and forbidding look and told her that she was now free to go anywhere, as she was unacceptable to him after having been in the power of a wicked captor for so long a time. He said his family honour would be tarnished if he received her back, as if nothing had happened. These terrible words fell from the lips of the Prince, while his heart was weeping. He knew his wife was pure, but he was anxious that public opinion should also be satisfied that Rama's wife had suffered no stain. Sita trembled and wept when she heard the harsh words of Rama and replied with great dignity that her heart was pure and that her husband who had known her for so many years ought to have judged her better. She thought that if he discarded her, there was no point in her living a moment longer and asked Lakshmana to prepare a pyre for her so that she might enter the fire and end her life. The pyre was made and lighted and the Princess unflinchingly walked into it. It was a sight for the gods who had assembled in large numbers in mid air to behold the scene of the meeting of Rama and Sita. The god of fire dared not burn the body of so pure a soul. So taking human form and stepping out of the flames, he conducted the Princess to Rama and asked him to accept her, vouching for her stainless purity. Amidst the acclamations of all those who were assembled there—the gods, the Vanaras and the Rakshasas—the Prince took her by the hand and all was well.

Now that his task was over and the period of fourteen years of exile had come to a close, Rama was anxious to go and see his brother Bharata at Ayodhya. So after installing Vibhishana on the throne of Lanka, he flew with Sita, Lakshmana and his Vanara friends to Ayodhya in

the aerial car, Pushpaka, which Vibhishana placed at his disposal. The great poem of Valmiki thus ends with the happy meeting of the brothers, the reunion of the family and the coronation of Rama and Sita. Rama ruled the kingdom for a very long time and during his reign people were so happy and prosperous that the term 'Ramarajya' has come to mean a heaven on earth.

VI

The Ramayana of Valmiki was afterwards continued by a very inferior poet, who added what is known as the Uttara Kanda. This section, after giving a long account of the early life of Ravana, proceeds to describe the final scenes in the lives of Rama and Sita. We are told that, after many years lived in perfect happiness with Sita, Rama heard reports that his subjects did not approve of his taking back Sita, who had been forcibly carried away by Ravana and detained in his house for several months. The king was afraid that his acceptance of Sita would encourage bad women in the kingdom. So he decided to banish Sita, though she was then in the family way. She had expressed, some time before, a desire to visit some of the hermitages in the forest. Rama, therefore, asked his brother Lakshmana to take her to the hermitage of Valmiki and there reveal to her that she should not return to the kingdom. Lakshmana passionately protested at first, but was sternly commanded by Rama to carry out his instructions. He obeyed with a heavy heart and took his sister-in-law to the hermitage of Valmiki and conveyed to her the orders of the King. Sita was shocked. She wept aloud and sank to the ground unable to contain her grief. Lakshmana averted his eyes and slowly crept away from the heart-rending scene. Meanwhile the inmates of

Valmiki's hermitage heard her cries came to the spot and conducted her to the sage

Sita dwelt in the hermitage leading an ascetic life and in course of time gave birth to the twins Lava and Kusa. These boys were brought up by Valmiki and they grew into noble youths. After he had composed the Ramayan, the sage taught them to sing the whole poem. They did not know that the poem was about their own father.

Meanwhile Rama made preparations to celebrate a horse sacrifice and sent invitations to all the neighbouring kings and sages. Among those who assembled to witness the ceremony were the disciples of Valmiki. They went to Rama's sacrificial hall accompanied by Lava and Kusa. The boys took the occasion there to sing parts of the Ramayana. When Rama heard of their performance he sent for them and made them sing a large part of the poem before the vast assembly that had gathered in the hall. Every one was delighted with the poetry and the music. And everyone saw that the boys closely resembled Rama himself though they were dressed as ascetics. Rama was also pleased and wanted to reward them with ample gifts of gold. But the boys refused to take any present. Rama asked them who the author of the poem was. They said it was Valmiki, the sage whose disciples had come to see the horse sacrifice. Then Rama realized that the boys were his own sons and sent word to Valmiki that he would take back Sita if she came into the assembly and solemnly declared that she had ever been pure and chaste. Valmiki consented and brought Sita with him. He bore witness to the purity of the queen and declared that Kusa and Lava were Rama's sons. Rama then asked Sita to add her own words to what the sage had said. Thus urged, Sita with downcast eyes said, 'If my heart is really pure and has ever been faithful to my husband

may my mother Earth open before me and take me in!' At these words the earth opened and a throne of gold came up with the mother goddess seated on it. The goddess stretched out her arms and took Sita into her lap and disappeared as she came.

While the assembly was astonished and held their breath, Rama cried, 'O goddess, bring back my Sita.' But it was too late. Sita had disappeared for ever from mortal gaze.

Rama continued to rule his kingdom for some more years. He had an image of Sita made in gold and installed in his palace. And when he felt that the time of his passing from the earth was approaching, he settled his sons and the sons of his three brothers in the various dominions of his empire and, accompanied by all his followers, descended into the waters of the river Sarayu and disappeared. Lakshmana had gone a little before him. Bharata, Satrughna, Sugriva and others accompanied Rama. Only Hanuman and Vibhishana were bidden to remain on earth as long as this world lasted.

CHAPTER V

THE STORY OF THE MAHABHARATA

I

The Mahabharata is a much longer epic than the Ramayana, for it contains about 100,000 verses, while the Ramayana has only 24,000. In fact, it is said to be the biggest of the epics of the world. It grew to its present length through many centuries. The original author was Vyasa, the compiler of the Vedas, and the main subject of the poem is the great war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The story is briefly as follows:

The kingdom of Hastinapura which was once ruled by Santanu, son of Kuru, was inherited by his two grandsons—Dhritarashtra and Pandu—who were minors. During their minority, their paternal uncle, Bhishma, who had taken a vow of celibacy for life, acted as regent. When the boys became majors, Pandu, the younger of the two, was made king, because Dhritarashtra, the elder, was blind. Both of them were now married. Pandu had two wives—Kunti and Madri. By the former he had three sons—Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna—and by the latter two, Nakula and Sahadeva. The five brothers were called Pandavas. Dhritarashtra and his wife Gandhari had, by a special blessing of the gods, a hundred sons and a daughter. These were known as the Kauravas after their ancestor Kuru. The eldest of them was Duryodhana.

While Pandu was ruling the kingdom, he met with a sudden death, as the result of a curse, and so Dhritarashtra, though born blind, had to step into his place and rule the country. He thus became the guardian of the Pandavas as well as of the Kauravas, his own sons. The Pandavas

and the Kauravas lived together and received instruction in the arts of war and peace from the same teacher Dronacharya. From the beginning there was a good deal of rivalry between the two sections of the royal house. The eldest of the Pandavas, Yudhishtira, was an embodiment of Dharma, and he was implicitly obeyed by his four brothers; whereas the eldest of the Kauravas, Duryodhana, was envious, crafty and malicious, and his brothers, who faithfully followed in his footsteps, were no better. The smouldering enmity between the two sections burst into flame, when the blind king, in course of time, proclaimed the eldest of the princes, namely, Yudhishtira, the Yuva-raja or the heir-apparent of the kingdom. Duryodhana hated his cousins for their good fortune and popularity and induced his father to send them to attend a religious festival at Varanavarta, where he had laid a fiendish plot to destroy them. He had built a house there of highly combustible materials and had arranged to set fire to it when the Pandavas came to dwell there. But the Pandavas had been forewarned and also their friends had a secret underground passage dug for them from their chamber in the house to the forest beyond. So when the house was set on fire and Duryodhana thought that his cousins perished in the flames, they had safely escaped to the forest unhurt and lived in disguise as Brahmins in a neighbouring country.

While the Pandavas were living there, they heard of the proclamation made by Drupada, the king of Panchala, that he would give his daughter in marriage to the prince who could bend the king's great bow and hit a mark which he had set in the sky. They went to the court of Drupada along with other Kshatriya princes, including Balarama and Sri Krishna, the sons of Vasudeva, their maternal uncle. Many of the princes assembled

there tried to hit the mark, but failed. At last Arjuna stepped up, lightly lifted the bow and shot five successive arrows, hitting the mark. The princess was won. And, soon after, it became known that the Brahmin youth who won the prize was no other than Arjuna, the famous warrior and the son of Pandu. When the prize was taken home, Kuntī, the mother of the Pandavas, was informed that Arjuna had won in a contest of archery and got a prize. And she, not knowing that it was a princess that had been won, innocently said that, if that was so, all the brothers should share it equally. The mother's word could not be set aside, and so, after much discussion, it was proposed and accepted that Draupadi should be the common wife of all the five Pandava princes

II

When it became public that the Pandavas had not perished in the flames at Varanavarta, Dhritarashtra sent for them and, on the advice of his uncle Bhishma, divided the kingdom between them and his own sons. The Pandavas now built a new capital called Indraprastha in their dominion, while Duryodhana ruled in the old capital Hastinapura. The reign of Yudhishtira was an ideal one. His subjects loved him ardently, because he made them all quite happy and prosperous. The king was wise, just and generous. There was no fear of famine, floods or robbers in the land. And crime was unknown. Yudhishtira was therefore known as Dharmaraja. His brothers were loyal to him and conquered many countries for him and extended his imperial sway. Also many kings accepted Dharmaraja as their overlord and emperor. He was thereupon advised to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice which a king of kings alone is entitled to perform. Invitations were accordingly sent to all the kings in the

land including Duryodhana. The old Bhishma, the grand-father of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas, Drona and Kripa, their common preceptors, the blind king Dhritarashtra and his hundred sons, and Karna, the friend of Duryodhana and the rival of Arjuna, and a thousand other potentates who had accepted Dharmaraja as their overlord—all came to attend the sacrifice at Indraprastha. Yudhishtira naturally asked the old veteran Bhishma to take the lead and direct all the proceedings connected with the sacrifice. Bhishma accordingly decided that, in offering the rites of hospitality, Krishna should be given the first place, as the Prince of Dwaraka was not an ordinary mortal, but God Vishnu Himself in human form. This decision at once roused the opposition of Sisupala, king of Chedi and the cousin of Krishna. He sprang up in the assembly and denounced Bhishma and the Pandavas for the insult they thus offered to the other kings, who were mightier than Krishna and ruled over wider kingdoms. Then rose Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva defending the wise decision of their grand-father and challenging to battle any one who opposed it. There was now consternation in the assembly at this war of words. Bhishma repeated his decision in a weighty speech and asked Sisupala to challenge Krishna to fight, if he dared. Sisupala, nothing daunted, thereupon challenged Krishna in most insulting terms which gave a shock to the assembled kings. Krishna had promised Sisupala's mother that he would forgive a hundred offences of his cousin, but that, if he exceeded that number, he would slay him. The number was now exceeded and so, calling for his divine weapons, he met the challenging foe and struck off his head. Sisupala's fall brought peace to the assembly and the Rajasuya sacrifice was completed and Yudhishtira was duly crowned emperor.

But all this was gall and wormwood to Duryodhana, who was already sick with envy at the prosperity of the Pandavas. He was very unhappy throughout the time he remained at Indraprastha and did not conduct himself there with any dignity. He went home filled with wrath against his cousins and their beautiful queen, who had once laughed at him, and wanted to compass their ruin somehow or other. They had escaped from the burning house at Varanavarta, they had distinguished themselves at Drupada's court, they had established themselves at Indraprastha and built a palace there, which was one of the wonders of the world, and Yudhishtira was now finally acknowledged as an emperor. Duryodhana thought that all this was due to the initial mistake made by his father when he proclaimed Yudhishtira heir-apparent to the throne of Hastinapura and later gave him half the kingdom. He made up his mind either to crush the Pandavas or to put an end to his own life, for he was mad with envy. He took counsel with his uncle Sakuni, who was as evil-hearted as himself. Sakuni comforted him and said that, if the Pandavas could not be overcome by force, they could be overcome by guile. He suggested that Yudhishtira, who had a weakness for gambling, might be invited to Hastinapura for a game of dice. And as Sakuni was an expert in casting dice, he undertook to play with him for high stakes and ruin him.

Sakuni's suggestion was accepted and the reluctant consent of the weak-minded Dhritarashtra was obtained and the invitation was sent. Yudhishtira thought that as a Kshatriya prince he could not refuse a challenge and responded to the invitation. The great match then began between Sakuni, the representative of Duryodhana, on one side and Yudhishtira on the other. The latter lost stake after stake. He lost his wealth and other possessions,

his horses and cattle. Then he staked his kingdom, his subjects and his servants, and he lost them too. And as the gambler's fever rose to a high pitch, he staked and lost his own brothers and himself, and at last, to the horror and dismay of all the persons assembled in the hall, he staked his queen—the lovely Draupadi—and lost her too.

The evil-hearted Duryodhana now sprang up in joy at the discomfiture of the Pandavas and wanted to insult their queen and take revenge on her, as she was now reduced to the position of a slave. He wanted that some one should go and bring Draupadi to the hall, so that she might be made to sweep the rooms like a servant. His brother Dussasana volunteered and ran to the queen's chamber. The noble lady stood aghast when she heard the news of the gambling match and tried to withdraw into the interior. But the wicked Dussasana sprang upon her and seized her by the hair and dragged her into the assembly hall. The Pandavas sat mute and helpless at this horrible outrage, as they knew they were now the slaves of Duryodhana, while Karna, Sakuni and other Kauravas rejoiced openly. Encouraged by these evil men, the miscreant proceeded to drag and disrobe her by force in the open assembly. The queen, having appealed in vain to the Pandava princes for protection, invoked through prayer the aid of Krishna whom she knew to be God in human form. At once a miracle happened. As one robe was removed from her body, another was found in its place, and as that was removed, still another was found in its place, and so on, till hundreds were removed by the tired hands of Dussasana. The man was ashamed, and he gave up the task as hopeless. The sight of the queen, dishevelled and outraged in the open assembly, was too much for Bhima among the Pandavas, and he swore a mighty oath that he would one day on the field of battle

tear open the breast of Dussasana and drink his blood. We shall see later how he fulfilled his vow. But at present these angry words of the Pandava prince brought no relief to the queen. On the other hand, her tormentors behaved more outrageously than before. Karna asked Dussasana to take Draupadī away, referring to her as a servant maid, and Dussasana began to drag her by the hair once more. And the shameless Duryodhana uncovered his left thigh before the lady and asked her to come and sit there. This unspeakable outrage drew down another terrible oath from Bhīma. He swore again and said that one day in open conflict he would break the thighs of the miscreant Kaurava with his mace. We shall see later how he fulfilled this vow also.

Seeing that passions were rising high, the blind king Dhritarashtra interfered at this stage, rebuked his son for his unseemly conduct and asked Draupadī to choose any boon she wanted. She at once said she desired Dharma-*raja* and his brothers should once more become free men. The king granted her request and bade his nephews go back with Draupadī to their capital and forget all that had taken place. But, before they reached their capital, the weak minded monarch was once more induced by his son to call them back and try their fortune by another throw of dice. And the stakes this time were that the losers should go and live in the forest for twelve years and remain *incognito* for one year before claiming their kingdom back, and that, if they were recognized during the *incognito* period, they should spend another twelve years in the forest.

Once more the dice were cast by Sakuni and Yudhishtira, and once more Sakuni won and Yudhishtira lost. There was no help for it now. The Pandavas had to abandon their kingdom and go into exile for thirteen

years. Dussasana once more insulted the queen of the Pandavas, asking her to desert them and choose some other husband who would protect her honour better. Bhima and Arjuna could only bite their lips and mutter to themselves: 'We shall bide our time.'

III

During the twelve years of their wanderings in the forest, the Pandava princes met with many adventures and were visited by several Rishis who comforted them in their distress and told them stories of ancient heroes who had suffered like them. It is in these forest discourses that we have those beautiful stories of Nala and Damayanti and of Savitri and Satyavan with which we are all familiar. And it is again in these discourses that we have many of those important discussions on questions of morality and religion and Hindu Dharma for which the Mahabharata is famous. During these twelve years the Pandavas made a pilgrimage also to all the holy places then recognized as such in India. At last in the final year of their forest life an incident happened which reveals to us the character of Dharmaraja.

At Hastinapura Duryodhana was incited by his evil advisers—Sakuni and Karna—to pay a visit to the Pandavas in the forest so that they might be stung by the contrast between their own misery and the pomp and power of their foes. Accordingly he set out with a large army and reached Dwaitavana, where the Pandavas were then staying. But, before he could meet his exiled cousins living in the interior, his army came into conflict with some Gandharvas who had occupied a part of the forest on the way and was thoroughly routed by them. Karna was forced to flee, and Duryodhana and Dussasana were taken captive and put in chains. Now the remnants

of the routed army of the Kauravas fled in all directions. Some of them ran to the Pandavas and begged for protection. Bhima scornfully refused to give any help to his wicked foes. But Dharmaraja reprimanded Bhima and said that, whatever might be the differences among themselves, the royal family of the Bharatas should show a united front against an external foe. So he asked his brothers to go to the rescue of Duryodhana. They obeyed at once and went and fought with the Gandharvas and defeated them. The chief of the Gandharvas was surprised at the chivalry of the Pandavas and consented to lead his prisoners of war into the presence of Dharmaraja and abide by his decision. Duryodhana and Dussasana were accordingly taken in chains to the Pandava chief, who at once set them free and asked them to go home and be happy. They hung their heads in shame and went away. But their repentance was short-lived, for they soon began to devise new plots against their cousins.

IV

Meanwhile, after the completion of the twelve years of forest life, the Pandavas were advised to go to the court of Virata, king of Matsya, and spend there the remaining one year of exile. As they had to live unrecognized by any during this year, they hid their weapons within a big tree and disguised themselves and took new names before they entered the service of the king. Yudhistira disguised himself as a Brahmin counsellor, Bhima as a cook, Arjuna as a dancing-master, Nakula as a keeper of horses and Sahadeva as a cowherd. Draupadi disguised herself as a servant maid and took service under the queen. Thus they all lived together in the royal household, serving the king and the queen in

their humble capacities for ten months without any difficulty. Then there was trouble.

Kichaka, the brother of the queen, fell in love with the queen's servant-maid or Sairandhri, as Draupadi called herself. And, when she rejected his advances, he became violent and once struck her in the very presence of the king. She appealed to the king against her assailant, but in vain. So she withdrew and complained bitterly to Bhima, who was disguised as the chief cook of the royal household, and said that, unless he protected her against Kichaka, she would put an end to her life. Bhima's wrath was roused and he made up his mind to kill him. So he advised her to make an appointment with Kichaka to meet her in secret at dead of night. When accordingly Kichaka went to the place of meeting in the dark, Bhima took him by surprise, leapt upon him and crushed him to death. But the trouble did not end there. For, when the relatives of Kichaka found the corpse and guessed that the cause of his mysterious death might be the queen's servant-maid, they carried her off by force and wanted to cremate her along with the dead body of Kichaka. But fortunately Bhima heard her screams and ran to her rescue. He reached the burning ground in time, tore up a tree, and using it as his weapon killed all her assailants and set her free. Then he returned to the palace unnoticed by any. The result of all this trouble was that the queen's servant-maid was given notice to quit her service.

Meanwhile there was other trouble brewing. The spies of Duryodhana, who had been searching for the Pandavas in all likely places, returned to Hastinapura and reported that Kichaka, the powerful commander of Virata's forces and the king's brother-in-law, had been mysteriously killed by someone at night. They suspected

that only one of the Pandava princes could have killed so mighty a warrior. Duryodhana, therefore, induced a neighbouring king who had been defeated by Kichaka before, to attack Virata's kingdom on the south, while he himself with his army promised to attack it from the north the next day. He expected that, if the Pandavas were hiding themselves at the court of Virata, they would come to the battlefield to help their master when he was attacked on both sides. They could then be easily recognized by their valour and sent back to the woods for another period of twelve years.

When this plan was put into operation, King Virata marched against the southern assailant with his army, which included all the Pandava princes in disguise, except Arjuna. At first, Virata suffered a reverse. He was defeated and taken prisoner. But Bhima soon rescued him and set him free. The other Pandava chiefs also distinguished themselves and completely changed the original defeat into a victory.

In the meantime, the Kauravas according to their agreement, made their appearance on the northern side of Virata's kingdom with their huge army which included all the well known warriors—Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Karna—and seized Virata's herds of cattle. The cowherds then flew to the capital with this alarming report. But there was no one there to lead an army against this new foe on the north. There was only the lad Uttara, the son of Virata, who boastfully declared that he could march, if only he had a worthy charioteer to drive his chariot. Thereupon Draupadi, who had not yet left the queen's service, suggested that the prince might take the dancing master at the court as his charioteer, as this man had once been the charioteer of the famous warrior, Arjuna. The dancing master was, as we know,

Arjuna himself and he consented to drive the prince's chariot. He took the reins and drove the chariot to the battlefield. But when Uttara came to know that he had to face the renowned warriors of the Kaurava army, his heart failed him. He jumped down from his chariot and ran back in terror. Arjuna now ran after the youth and brought him back and asked him to take his place as charioteer, while he himself would fight. He asked him first to drive the chariot to the big tree on the road where he had hidden his weapons. They took down the bundle from the branches where it had been hidden and then Arjuna revealed his identity to Uttara. The prince was now elated that he was going to serve the world-renowned Arjuna as charioteer and they both advanced to meet the Kaurava army.

Arjuna gave the Kaurava chiefs that day a foretaste of what was in store for them on the field of Kurukshetra. He drove away Karna wounded and bleeding from the battlefield, destroyed the chariot of Kripa, overcame his own preceptor Drona and his mighty son Asvatthama and laid low his own grandfather Bhishma. The turn of Duryodhana came at last and he was easily put to flight. Thus Arjuna remained the unchallenged victor on the battlefield, and the proud Kaurava army melted away. The Kauravas now recognized Arjuna, but by that day the thirteenth year of exile had come to an end and so nothing could be done to the Pandavas.

Uttara returned home and revealed to his father that the dancing-master at his court was the famous Arjuna himself and that it was he who had saved his kingdom from being overrun by the Kauravas. Great was the rejoicing at Virata's court when this was followed by the revelation of the identity of the other Pandava princes and of Draupadi, their queen. The king duly honoured

them all, and a marriage was soon arranged between his daughter and Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son by Subhadra. Subhadra was Krishna's sister and she and her son were staying with Krishna at Dwaraka during the period of exile of the Pandavas. Now that the thirteen years of exile had come to an end, they were sent for and the marriage was duly celebrated at Virata's court.

V

After the festivities connected with Abhimanyu's marriage were over, the advisers of the Pandavas considered what steps should be taken to see that their kingdom was restored to the princes according to the original contract and peace established between the two sections of the Kuru race. It was resolved that Drupada should send his priest as an ambassador to the court of Duryodhana and that meanwhile the Pandavas should seek the alliance of all neighbouring kings so that these might help them, if there was to be a war. After giving this advice, the friends of the Pandavas returned to their respective countries. They had not much hope that peace would be established between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, as they knew how obstinate Duryodhana was.

Therefore, though the ambassador was sent to Hastinapura to negotiate a peace, both sides began to prepare for war and seek alliances with other kings and chiefs. Both Duryodhana and Arjuna desired to secure the alliance of Krishna and reached Dwaraka the same day. Krishna was sleeping at the time. Duryodhana went in first and seated himself proudly on a chair at the head of the bed. Arjuna went next and, bowing to his sleeping friend, stood humbly at his feet. After some time Krishna awoke and sat up. His eyes first fell on Arjuna. Then he saw Duryodhana. Both explained the

purpose of their visit. Duryodhana said that, as he had come first, he should have the first claim on Krishna's help. But Krishna said that, though Duryodhana had come first, his eyes first fell on Arjuna. Therefore he would try to help both. He put before them two alternatives. There was his army of ten divisions fully equipped and there was himself unarmed and resolved not to fight. They had to choose between the two. And, as Arjuna was the younger of the two suppliants, he should choose first. Arjuna gladly chose the unarmed Krishna, for he knew that 'wherever Krishna was, victory was sure to be there.' Equally glad was Duryodhana, for in his eyes there was no comparison between a well-equipped army of ten divisions and a single unarmed warrior, however great he might be. Thus both were satisfied and went their ways.

Meanwhile the negotiations for peace were going on. The priest of Drupada was told at last that a definite reply would be sent later and was summarily dismissed from Hastinapura. But only an evasive reply was sent afterwards through Sanjaya. Dharmaraja was anxious to have peace at any price. He declared that, even if Duryodhana gave five villages to the Pandavas, he would be satisfied. But Duryodhana, relying on the huge army he had been able to muster, said that he would not give the Pandavas even as much land as a needle's point would cover. In these circumstances, Krishna himself undertook to go to Hastinapura and plead for peace. He went to the court of the Kauravas and passionately appealed to the blind king Dhritarashtra to restrain his sons in their headlong career of injustice and violence and to treat his brother's sons, the Pandavas, with affection and kindness. His statesmanlike speech was applauded and supported by the old warriors, Bhishma, Drona and others. But neither the

pleadings of Krishna nor the warnings of the aged counsellors of the court, nor the appeals of his own aged parents could shake the obstinate Duryodhana. Far from giving ear to the arguments of the great ambassador Duryodhana had the audacity to devise a plot to seize him by force and make him a prisoner. Krishna now gave the miscreant and his followers a glimpse of his divine might and left the court with a grave warning to Duryodhana.

Kunti the heroic mother of the Pandavas who had been staying at Hastinapura all these thirteen years now met her nephew Krishna and heard from his own lips the result of his embassy. Her spirit was roused and she sent to her sons through Krishna a fiery message bidding them prepare for war and fight to the bitter end. She then went in private to Karna and revealed to him a secret which stunned that great warrior. It was the secret of his birth. Karna was Kunti's own son begotten by her before her marriage with Pandu as a result of her innocently chanting a mantra sacred to the sun god. He was the sun god's gift to her in those far off days. She was frightened by the unexpected gift. So she abandoned the child and ran away home in terror. The child was picked up by a low born man, a charioteer by profession. Karna was thus really the eldest brother of the Pandavas. His mother now exhorted him to join their side in the coming war. Karna was profoundly moved by this story. He was the chief lieutenant of Duryodhana and had always looked upon Arjuna as his life long foe. And now he learnt that Arjuna was his own blood brother. He pondered sadly over his fate and told his mother that he could not grant her request. He said that he was in duty bound to fight on the side of his friend and patron—Duryodhana.

VI

There was now no course left open to the Pandavas but war. So they gathered their forces and marched to Kurukshetra where Duryodhana had already assembled his forces. It was a critical day in the history of Hindusthan, when the Kaurava army of eleven akshauhini stood facing the Pandava army of seven akshauhini. The poet tells us that, on that fateful morning on the battlefield, Dharmaraja came forward, looked at the impenetrable Vyuha formed by Bhishma, the generalissimo on the other side, and, becoming pale with fear, confessed to Arjuna his grave doubts about their success in the ensuing war. But Arjuna encouraged his brother by quoting an ancient verse:

‘They that are desirous of victory do not conquer so much by might and prowess as by compassion, piety and virtue.’

‘Therefore,’ said Arjuna, ‘we are certain of victory in this war, O king. Moreover, according to the sage Narada, victory is certain to be where Krishna is. Therefore, I see no reason for sorrow.’

Dharmaraja then took heart and retired to his place in the army. Then ensued a short conversation between Arjuna and Krishna, who had consented to be his charioteer in this war. Krishna advised his friend before he began the battle to purify himself and pray to the goddess Durga for success. Arjuna accordingly descended from his chariot and with a devout heart chanted a hymn in praise of the goddess. The goddess was pleased with his devotion and appeared before him. She blessed Arjuna, saying: ‘O son of Pandu, you will vanquish your enemy in a short time, for you have Narayana Himself to help you.’

After the disappearance of the goddess, Arjuna mounted his chariot and both the hero and the charioteer blew

their conchs. It is immediately after this that we have the famous Bhagavad Gita episode. While the heroes on both sides were blowing their conchs and the clash of weapons was about to begin, Arjuna saw in front of him his teachers, friends and kinsmen whom he would have to kill in battle and was overcome with pity. He dropped his bow and told Krishna that he would not fight. Thereupon Krishna discussed with him at length the whole question of the duties of man—their source, their nature, their aim and the spirit in which they have to be discharged—and convinced him at last that it was his duty to fight. At the end of this famous discourse Arjuna once more took up his bow and proceeded to fight.

But the battle did not begin immediately. There was another interruption. Arjuna, to his surprise, now saw his brother Dharmaraja putting off his armour and weapons and walking towards the enemy. Not only Arjuna but his other brothers also were taken aback. They left their chariots and ran after their elder brother puzzled at his strange conduct. Dharmaraja now went straight to his grandfather Bhishma, the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army. He fell at his feet and said: 'O invincible warrior, we are going to fight with you. Grant us permission to do so and give us your blessing.' Bhishma willingly granted him permission and gave his blessing. He said that he himself was fighting on the other side, not because it was the righteous side, but because he was bound to the Kauravas by the ties of service. Then Dharmaraja went to his teachers Drona and Kripa in succession and sought their permission and blessings in a similar manner. All these leaders felt that the Pandava cause was undoubtedly a righteous cause, but as true soldiers they had to be loyal to the Kaurava king in whose service they had been all their lives. They therefore readily blessed

Dharmaraja and granted him permission not only to fight against them but also, if necessary, to kill them in battle.

Then the five brothers went back to their positions to commence the fight. But Dharmaraja still had some scruples. He now loudly proclaimed to the enemy: 'Even now he who chooses to fight on our side will be welcomed here and will be considered our friend.' Only one man took advantage of this offer, and that was Yuyutsu, one of the Kaurava brothers.

The poet tells us that all the kings assembled on the field of battle admired the compassion and friendship displayed by the Pandavas towards their kinsmen. He says: 'Eulogistic hymns were sung in praise of those illustrious heroes. The minds and hearts of all were attracted towards them. Both the Aryans and the non-Aryans who saw or heard of this conduct of the Pandavas wept and their voices were choked with tears.'

Then the battle began.

VII

Bhishma commanded the Kaurava forces for the first ten days of the battle. During this time the old warrior distinguished himself by his valour as well as by the purity of his mind. He is said to have killed each day ten thousand of the enemy. The Pandavas could not stand against him, and so, on his own advice, they put up against him Sikhandi, son of Drupada, whom, according to his vow, he would not fight, as he knew he had been a woman in his former life. Under cover of this man, Arjuna shot his arrows freely and brought down the veteran on the tenth day of the battle. The heroes on both sides stopped fighting at once to do reverence to the fallen warrior. He blessed them all from his bed of arrows on the battlefield and said that, as he had been

given the boon of quitting his body at his own will and pleasure, he would wait till the sun entered on his northern course. So, a ditch was dug round his bed, and he lay on that protected ground for many days even after the war.

After Bhishma, Drona became the commander in chief and led the Kaurava army for the next five days. Though he was an old man of eighty five, he fought as vigorously as Bhishma and many deeds of valour were done on both sides. Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna, a mere stripling of sixteen, fought at first with matchless valour and covered himself with glory. Later he undertook the formidable task of breaking the chakra vyuha or the circular array planned by Drona. Single handed the heroic lad fought against Drona, Asvatthama, Kripa, Karna, Duryodhana and Dussasana and routed them all individually, but fell at last when all these veterans joined together and assailed him on all sides. Abhimanyu is the most glorious name among all the heroes who fought and fell on the field of Kurukshetra. He fell on the thirteenth day of the battle.

When Arjuna heard from Bhima and others that it was Jayadratha who had prevented them from going to the rescue of the lad who had been assailed on all sides he took a solemn vow that he would kill that man before the sun set on the next day or kill himself. So he had to fight very hard indeed the following day to fulfil his vow. The Kauravas, when they heard of the vow placed Jayadratha in the rear of the army and tried their utmost to prevent Arjuna from reaching him. Both Arjuna and Bhima performed prodigies of valour, and, at last just as the sun was setting and Jayadratha was assuring himself that the day had ended the shaft of Arjuna flew over the army and carried off his head.

The battle did not cease that day with the approach of night as usual, but continued till midnight under torch-light. There was furious fighting between Karna and Ghatotkacha, the son of Bhima. And Ghatotkacha was slain at last with an invincible weapon, the gift of Indra, which Karna had kept in reserve for use against Arjuna. After some more fighting, the armies rested for a few hours by mutual consent. But, when the moon rose, the battle was renewed. It raged like a tempest, till the moonlight gave place to the dawn and the sun rose above the horizon and shone over the battlefield strewn with thousands of bodies of dead men, elephants and horses.

It was the fifteenth day of the battle and the old commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army was as unassailable as ever. The Pandavas had recourse therefore to a stratagem. Bhima killed an elephant called Asvatthama, and cried aloud that Asvatthama was dead. Asvatthama being also the name of Drona's son, the generalissimo was staggered for a moment and enquired of Dharmaraja whether the report was true, for he knew that Dharmaraja would never speak an untruth. But the Pandava chief temporized for the moment and repeated aloud the cry, 'Asvatthama is dead,' muttering the word 'elephant' under his breath to satisfy his conscience. But it was an untruth all the same, and, as we shall see, he had to suffer for it afterwards. When Drona was convinced, on Dharmaraja's authority, that his son was slain he dropped his bow, and in that defenceless condition he was killed by Drishtadyumna, the brother of Draupadi and the commander-in-chief of the Pandava forces.

After Drona's death, Karna became the generalissimo of the Kaurava army. Duryodhana had great hopes of him from the beginning as the only warrior who could stand up against Arjuna. It was the sixteenth day of the

battle, and the armies fought with the usual vigour. Karna defeated Nakula, but spared his life. Dharmaraja likewise defeated Duryodhana, but spared his life when he swooned away. And Arjuna, as usual, carried everything before him. Karna was dissatisfied with the results of that day's fighting and vowed that on the next day he would either slay Arjuna or be slain by him. He saw that Arjuna had a very able charioteer in Krishna and so he asked Salya, the king of Madra, to be his charioteer, not knowing that Salya, the maternal uncle of Nakula and Sahadeva, though he was fighting on the side of the Kauravas on account of a promise he had unwittingly made to Duryodhana, was secretly in sympathy with the Pandavas. Salya agreed to the proposal, but he was more of a hindrance than a help to Karna.

The seventeenth day of the battle began with great fury on both sides. Bhima bore the brunt of it. He met Dussasana in the course of the fight and a fierce duel ensued between them. Resounding blows were dealt by each upon the other. But at last Bhima with his mighty mace struck down his foe, and now, remembering his awful oath, he seized his sword and leapt upon the fallen man and ripped his breast open and drank his blood. It was a terrible deed—the sequel to the shameful wrong done to Draupadi more than thirteen years before.

Meanwhile Arjuna fought his way to Karna who had driven from the field Dharmaraja, Nakula and Sahadeva, and a bitter fight ensued between the two famous warriors. Karna discharged a snake like missile which might have carried off Arjuna's head, had not his charioteer pressed down his car miraculously a cubit's length into the ground. Arjuna lost his golden crown but remained unhurt. He began to assail his foe with sharp arrows. At this moment one of the wheels of Karna's chariot sank

into the ground and he leapt down to raise it. While he was thus engaged, the arrows of Arjuna continued to pierce him.

'Is this fair?' he cried.

And Krishna retorted: 'Was it fair, O Karna, when you advised the Kauravas to lock up the Pandavas in a house treacherously and set fire to it? Was it fair when you openly encouraged Dussasana to unrobe the Pandava queen in the assembly hall? Why do you prate of Dharma now when you are in extremity? You have forfeited all right to invoke Dharma to your aid by all these wicked deeds of yours.'

Karna was a man of great virtues. His valour was well known. His generosity was proverbial. His loyalty was unassailable. But he had equally great faults. It was he who had egged on Duryodhana in his headlong career of injustice and violence. But for him, there would have been no war between the two sections of the royal house of Kuru. He now saw that he was a doomed man. His sins had found him. So he left the chariot wheel, stood his ground and fought like a hero and fell. The poet says that after his death there arose from Karna's body a radiant light which, ascending, mingled with the crimson light of the setting sun.

When Karna fell, the battle ceased for the day and the Kauravas returned to their camp plunged in grief and despair. On the next day—the eighteenth day of the battle—Salya was made the commander of the Kaurava forces, but he was soon slain by Dharmaraja. The fight continued even after his fall, but in the afternoon the Kaurava army broke and fled from the field. Duryodhana ran away and concealed himself in a lake. When the Pandavas came to know his hiding place, they went there and goaded him by their taunts to come out and

fight. He came out at last and offered to fight a duel with any one of them. His offer was accepted and there was a fierce combat between him and Bhima. The latter fought with all his might and at last broke his adversary's thigh bones. Duryodhana fell, never to rise again. Bhima set his foot on the fallen foe and felt that Draupadi's wrongs were at last redressed and his own vow was fulfilled.

The victorious Pandavas then returned to their camp and sent a message about the fall of Duryodhana to his aged parents. When the news reached the Kaurava camp, three heroes started from there to go and see the dying Duryodhana on the battlefield. One of them, Asvatthama, the son of Drona, begged of him permission for taking vengeance on the victorious enemy. Duryodhana thereupon in his last moments installed him as general and asked him to do what he could. Asvatthama, with his two companions, now went to the camp of the Pandava army at dead of night. The men were fast asleep after the end of the fight. He first entered the tent of the commander-in-chief, Drishtadyumna, who had slain his father Drona. He strangled him to death in his sleep. Then he killed the five sons of Draupadi, and, proceeding from tent to tent, mercilessly killed many men of the rank and file of the army. He cut the throats of all of them as they lay asleep. Fortunately, the Pandavas and Draupadi were not there. They had been drawn away from the camp by the all-knowing Krishna for the performance of some religious ceremonies after their victory.

When the ghastly news of the night-attack of the enemy reached the ears of the Pandavas, they ran to the camp and found that their sons, relatives and friends had all been murdered in cold blood. Draupadi swooned

when she heard that all her sons and brothers had been killed. The Pandavas then pursued the enemy and found him bathing in the Ganges after his foul deed. A fight ensued between him and Arjuna. But Krishna and others intervened and prevented more bloodshed. Asvatthama was made to yield a token of submission and was allowed to go forth with a curse on his head that he should wander homeless on the earth for his crime as long as he lived.

The survivors now marched to Hastinapura. But in the circumstances of the massacres of the last day of the war their march was more like a funeral procession than a triumph. At first Dharmaraja, unable to bear the loss of so many of his kindred, wanted to retire from the world. He had no inclination to enter Hastinapura and ascend the throne. But he was persuaded with great difficulty by several Rishis, by his brothers and by Krishna, to take up the reins of the kingdom and restore peace and order in the land. He consented at last to be installed on the throne along with Draupadi. Krishna himself sprinkled holy water on their heads during the installation ceremony.

VIII

All this time the old warrior Bhishma had been lying on the battlefield on his bed of arrows, waiting for the auspicious time when the sun would enter on his northern course. Dharmaraja, accompanied by Krishna and other princes and sages, went to see him and take his advice on many matters of state awaiting solution at the end of the great war. The old hero bestirred himself and out of his mature experience gave them long discourses on various subjects. These are now embodied in the Santi and the Anusasana parvas of the epic, which form a mine of information on Hindu religion and ethics.

Bhishma discoursed on Dharma in general and then on the duties of kings. He discoursed on truth, on non-violence, on the eradication of desires, on the Law of Karma, on the nature of the Absolute and on several other topics. At last on the appointed day he gave up his soul in peaceful contemplation of the Supreme. Thus ended the long life of Bhishma, the noblest and purest of the heroes of the Mahabharata.

IX

The Pandavas ruled in Hastinapura for many years after the war and treated the blind old king Dhritarashtra with great respect. Dharmaraja performed a great horse-sacrifice, in which thousands of men were fed and heaps of gold and silver and precious stones were given away to the poor. Some years after this great event, Dhritarashtra with his wife, Gandhari, and Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, retired to the Himalayas, and a report soon reached Hastinapura that they had perished in a forest fire. And, not long after this, came the news that there was an internecine conflict among the Yadavas in which many had perished and that Krishna, after taking part in it, as in duty bound, had retired to a lonely spot in the forest and given up his body when a hunter shot an arrow at him by a mistake.

The Pandavas too were now tired of life, and so, placing Parikshit, the posthumous son of Abhimanyu, on the throne, started on their journey to the Himalayas, accompanied by Draupadi. The queen fell on the way and died, and so did all the brothers, one by one, till at last Dharmaraja was left alone. The king of the gods now came down in his celestial chariot to escort the righteous prince to heaven. But Dharmaraja refused to enter the chariot till a dog which had been following him a

long way was also allowed to enter. Remonstrances on the part of Indra were of no avail.

'O great Indra,' said Dharmaraja, 'I cannot desert this faithful dog for the sake of my own happiness. It is sinful to desert anyone who is devoted to us.'

The dog then disappeared and the voice of unseen Dharma was heard that the king had earned by his merit the region of unending bliss. But there was one more trial for Dharmaraja. He wanted to go where his brothers and Draupadi were. Heaven would be no heaven for him if he could not meet them there. So he was conducted to the regions of the dead. But to his surprise and horror he beheld his brothers, Draupadi and even Bhishma suffering indescribable torments, while Duryodhana was enjoying supreme happiness. He was astounded and refused to budge from the place where his presence seemed to give some relief to the sufferers. He refused to go to heaven which he had earned by his own merit, as he found that those whom he loved were to be cut off from it. But this was all an illusion created by the king of the gods as a punishment for the untruth which Dharmaraja had uttered at the time of Drona's death. After this brief experience of pain, he was wafted to the real heaven where he was united in undying bliss with all those whom he had loved on earth.

CHAPTER VI

THE LEELAS OF KRISHNA

I

Next in importance to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata among the popular scriptures of Hinduism is the Bhagavata Purana. Its great popularity is due to the wonderful picture it gives of the life of Sri Krishna. We have already seen the important part played by Krishna in the Mahabharata. But the Mahabharata gives us only his later life, especially his intimate relations with his cousins, the Pandavas. In the epic we have very few references to his early life. The Bhagavata Purana tries to supply this omission by giving us a detailed account of the birth, childhood and youth of Krishna. The book is traditionally attributed to Vyasa himself, the original author of the Mahabharata. But many believe that it is the work of a much later writer. The author, whoever he was, has so marvellously succeeded in his attempt that the enchanting picture he has given of the young Krishna is enshrined in the hearts of all Hindus. Krishna, the teacher of the Bhagavad Gita, can be admired and appreciated only by the educated few, but Krishna, the cowherd of the Bhagavata Purana, is loved and worshipped by millions of people, both educated and uneducated.

In ancient times, Mathura was the capital of the kings of the Yadava dynasty. The Yadavas were a pastoral race living on both sides of the river Yamuna. They consisted of many tribes who were turbulent and often quarrelled with one another. When Ugrasena was ruling in Mathura, his own son Kamsa deposed him and

put him in prison. Ugrasena's brother, Devaka, had a daughter named Devaki. Devaki married Vasudeva, son of Surasena, who was also a Yadava chief. After the marriage, when the bride was being taken home by the bridegroom to his house in a chariot driven by Kamsa, her cousin, a voice was heard from heaven. Addressing the charioteer, it said :

'O Fool, you are conducting to her house a girl whose eighth son will prove your slayer.'

As soon as Kamsa heard the voice, he seized his sword and, dragging down Devaki, wanted to kill her on the spot. But Vasudeva intervened and said that he would put into the hands of Kamsa all her children as soon as they were born to be dealt with by him as he pleased. He begged him, therefore, to spare the life of Devaki. Kamsa was satisfied and they drove on. He could not, however, get over his fear. So he put Vasudeva and Devaki in prison under close guard and killed every child of theirs as soon as it was born. He thus killed six of them. Devaki then conceived a seventh time. But this time the child was miraculously transferred from her womb to that of Rohini, another wife of Vasudeva, who, for fear of Kamsa, was then living at Gokula on the other side of the Yamuna. He was thus preserved and was afterwards known as Balarama. Devaki again conceived, and her eighth child was born at midnight in prison.

The poet says that the Lord appeared in His divine form at first, and the lying-in-chamber was filled with a dazzling light. Vasudeva and Devaki understood that it was no human child that was born, but a divine incarnation, and so with joined palms they glorified the Lord. Devaki was supremely pleased that the Almighty had lain in her womb for a time before He manifested Himself.

Having thus shown His divine form to His parents, the Lord then assumed the form of a human child

That very moment, the divine Maya or the power of the Lord took birth in Gokula as the female child of Yasoda, the wife of Nanda. And a prompting came into the mind of Vasudeva that he should take his new born son across the Yamuna to Gokula and, exchanging him for Yasoda's daughter, should come back to the prison, before any one knew of the birth of the child. Vasudeva accordingly took the child in his arms. Immediately the prison doors opened of their own accord and the guards on duty were found to be in deep sleep. Vasudeva went out and reached the banks of the Yamuna. The river was in flood and the current was strong and swift. But it parted and made way for him. He therefore safely reached the other shore and found all the inhabitants of Gokula also in deep sleep. He quickly entered the house of Nanda and placing his precious burden on the bed of Yasoda without her knowledge and taking up her new born child lying near her, came out and returned to Mathura. He now laid the daughter of Yasoda by the side of Devaki and went back to his own cell in the prison. Then the prison doors shut themselves of their own accord, and the bolts and bars leaped into their places.

The guards now awoke and on their startled ears fell the cries of the new born babe. They ran at once to Kamsa and informed him of the birth of a child to Devaki. The wicked prince, knowing that this eighth child of his cousin would be the cause of his death, rushed in haste to the prison to put an end to it. Devaki pleaded piteously that it was only a female child and would do him no harm. Turning a deaf ear to her cries, Kamsa snatched the child from her arms and dashed it down on a slab of stone. But the child, instead of falling down, flew up

Gokula, for two of his sons were living there—Balarama, the son of Rohini, and Krishna, the son of Devaki. About the former he could ask openly, but about Krishna, the younger son, he could not ask openly, for Nanda and Yasoda thought that he was their own son. So Vasudeva simply said: 'O brother, I am glad to hear that at this advanced age when you had given up all hope of having any children, you have been fortunately blessed with a son. I trust the child and the mother are well.'

Nanda assured him they were well and took leave of him. But before parting, Vasudeva gave him a solemn warning which Nanda could not understand.

'O brother,' said Vasudeva, 'now that you have paid the king's dues, please return home without delay, for something in me whispers that ominous events are going to happen in your Gokula.'

Wondering what this warning might mean, Nanda and his friends set out in their country carts from Mathura the very next day. Meanwhile an ominous event had happened in Gokula. Under instructions from Kamsa, a she-demon called Putana, whose occupation was to kill new-born children in cities, villages and hamlets, went to Gokula to see whether there was any new-born child there. She was, as it were, an epidemic personified. She had the power of flying through air and assuming any form she liked. She soon reached the colony and transformed herself into a beautiful woman. She passed through the streets admired by all and entered the house of Nanda on hearing from there the cries of a new-born babe. She boldly went into the room where the infant Krishna was lying on his bed and smiling on all the people there took the child in her lap and began to suckle him. She had such a charming manner that both Rohini and Yasoda were overpowered and kept looking on without asking

and appeared in the sky as a goddess with eight arms holding eight shining weapons in her hands. The goddess addressed Kamsa and said :

‘Fool, what will you gain by killing me? Your enemy who will put an end to your life and to your wicked rule is elsewhere. Do not kill innocent children hereafter.’

So saying, she vanished from his sight. Kamsa was humbled. In a mood of penitence he apologized to Vasudeva and Devaki for all the wrongs he had done to them and set them free. But his repentance was short-lived. For his counsellors were more wicked than he was himself, and they egged him on to greater atrocities than before.

Meanwhile at Gokula there was great rejoicing in Nanda's household at the birth of a son. On the eleventh day of the happy event priests came, performed the customary rites, blessed the child and gave him the name of Krishna. Drums were sounded and musicians played and sang. The streets of the village were swept, the houses were decorated with flags and wreaths. And cows and oxen were smeared with turmeric and oil and decked with peacock feathers and garlands. Gopas and Gopis were filled with joy and flocked into Nanda's house to see the child and give presents to its parents. The blessed Rohini was also in that company. She moved about the house welcoming guests and looking after their needs. All the people of Gokula were now happy, for, from the day of Krishna's birth, the village began to grow in prosperity in every direction.

II

Some time later Nanda went up to Mathura to pay his annual tribute to Kamsa. There he met Vasudeva. The latter was anxious to know how the people fared at

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her any question. The wicked demon had come with her breasts smeared with a deadly poison and hoped that the child would suck the poison along with the milk and die at once. But the divine child who knew her heart began to suck the life of the demon along with her poisoned milk. For her vital organs now began to wither. She tossed her arms and legs in convulsions. Her eyes opened wide and the eye-balls began to turn in their sockets. She wailed aloud : ' Enough, enough, now let me go.' Her suffering was so great that she could no longer conceal her identity. The beautiful form which she had assumed faded away and in its place her real form which was hideous revealed itself. She fell down and died a ghastly death. And on her bosom lay the divine infant playing without fear. The Gopis who had been stunned with the wild cries of the demon now made bold to approach her and snatch away the child. And the frightened mother received him in her arms, covered him with kisses and invoked the blessings of all the gods on him. Just then Nanda and his companions returned from Mathura and were astounded at the sight of the huge body of the demon. They concluded that Vasudeva had rightly foretold them of the situation in Gokula. They now listened to the whole story of the death of the demon and, after hacking her body to pieces, carried each piece to a distant place and burnt it.

Soon after this incident Yasoda had another experience of the prowess of her darling child. On the day on which his birth-star was in the ascendant a feast was held in the house. Certain rites were performed and, as there was a big crowd in the house, the child was put to sleep outside on a small bed under what appeared to be a cart loaded with vessels containing milk, cheese and butter. He awoke after a short time and with his little feet kicked

the cart with the result that all the vessels in it were shattered to pieces and the wheels and axle were thrown out of gear. The Gopas and Gopis heard the noise and ran to the place. They were greatly surprised to see the cart overturned and the ground wet with milk and cheese. They could hardly believe that the child had kicked away the cart, though the boys playing near reported to them that they had seen him do it. Yasoda said that it might be another evil spirit like Putana, who had come to injure her darling—which was a fact.

Another day the good mother was fondling the child in her lap in the open air. Suddenly she felt he became too heavy for her lap. So she made him sit on the ground. And, as he was playing there quite happily, she went in to see whether a pot of fresh milk was safe from the cat. Now a demon called Trinavrita, an emissary of Kamsa, came to Gokula and saw Krishna seated on the ground. At once assuming the form of a whirlwind he carried off the child. On account of the clouds of dust raised by the wind none could see what had happened. Yasoda rushed out for her darling and could not find him on the ground where she had left him. On all sides trees were crashing down, roofs of houses were being blown away and cows and calves were running helter skelter. Missing her child in that violent blast, the poor woman cried at the top of her voice. But in the confused noise caused by the whirlwind none could hear her. After some time the wind subsided and the Gopis heard Yasoda crying that her child was missing. They then ran hither and thither searching for him.

Meanwhile the demon carried Krishna up into the sky, but felt the burden too heavy for him. He was unable to proceed further. He tried to free himself and drop the child, but could not do so. For the child clung

tightly to his throat. The more the demon tried to shake him off the more tightly did the child press his neck with his hands, till at last the demon's eyes were forced out of their sockets and he fell dead on the village green. Krishna was still hanging at his neck, when the Gopis who had been weeping and wailing heard the sound of a heavy fall and saw the dead body of the demon. The child was unhurt. The women picked him up and carried him home triumphantly to his mother.

Observing all these strange happenings, the old cow-herd Nanda realized the truth of the warning given to him by Vasudeva at Mathura. But Yasoda had glimpses of another kind of knowledge denied to her husband. For, one day she had a rather startling kind of experience. Some of the children who had been playing with Krishna came and told her that he had put a handful of earth into his mouth as little children do. She at once ran and caught hold of her child, severely rebuked him and asked him to open his mouth. He refused and tried to dodge her and run away. She threatened him in several ways. But finding that her threats had no effect on him she began to coax him. At last he obeyed and opened his mouth. And what did Yasoda see there? She saw, as it were in a vision, the entire universe—the earth with its mountains, oceans and continents, the sun and the moon, the stars and the planets. She saw her own village there and herself too and her darling child standing before her with his mouth open. 'Is this a dream?' she exclaimed. 'Or is it a strange illusion? Am I in my senses? Or does my child possess Yogic powers?' Suddenly light dawned upon her mind and she saw the truth of the world—how all changing things are rooted in a changeless spirit. But the spell of the world was soon cast on her again. She lost all memory of what she had seen and she placed her

son in her lap with a heart overflowing with a mother's love as before .

III

When Balarama and Krishna grew a little older their childish sports were a source of great delight to the cowherds of Gokula. Never were there such beautiful and charming boys. Balarama was fair and Krishna was dark in complexion. Balarama was strong and sturdy, but Krishna was graceful, active and sprightly. There was a light in Krishna's eyes and a music in his voice which made one's heart leap with joy. The two brothers always played together and were loved and petted by all the Gopis. They would fearlessly catch hold of the tails of calves and run after them, they would pull the ears of dogs, they would overturn the waterpots in the house. They would splash the water and roll in the mud. They would not mind the thorns in the grass, nor the spikes in the hedge. Their mothers were therefore ever anxious to protect them from accidents, but their attempts were in vain.

When Krishna was able to run about, he became more charming and naughty and more lovable. The Gopis of the Vraja were enamoured of his appearance, his childish prattle and his mischievous pranks. He annoyed them in a thousand ways by stealing their butter and cheese or secretly drinking the milk out of their milkpots or driving away their calves from their houses. But they loved him all the more for his mischief. One day they came in a body to Nanda's house to make a mock report against him to Yasoda in his presence.

'O mother Yasoda,' they cried, 'this child of yours has become very naughty indeed. He untethers our calves before the milking time, and if we threaten to punish

him he laughs and runs away. He steals the milk and curds from our houses and shares them with his friends. When he finds nothing in the vessels for him to take, he breaks them and goes away. When we keep our pots of cheese and butter hanging from the roof beyond his reach, he devises ingenious ways of getting at them. He either piles bench upon bench and gets up to reach them or ascends upon the shoulders of his associates and brings down the pots. When these devices fail, he throws stones at them from below and, when the pots break and the contents drop, he gathers them in the hollow of his palms and feeds himself and his friends. He seems to have a perfect knowledge of the contents of each pot and of the movements of every inmate of the house. For he comes on his raids just when everybody is away and empties just that pot which we have taken the greatest care to hide. Look at him, he now stands before you, a picture of innocence. You are a simple and artless woman, O Yasoda. Wherever did you pick up this imp of mischief?'

The Gopis made these complaints in a tone of mock-seriousness, all the while watching Krishna's charming face and pouting lips. And when the child ran away from them, lisping, 'I will go away now, you may fearlessly tell mother some more lies,' they burst into laughter and said: 'What a sweet little darling you have, Yasoda!'

Once Yasoda too had a similar experience. She was churning the curds in a pot to extract butter when her darling son came up to her, took hold of the churning-rod and stopped her churning. The mother took the child in her lap and fondled him for a time. But when she saw that the milk in the kitchen was boiling over she put him down and went in haste to remove the pot from the fire. Meanwhile Krishna carried away all the butter spilling the curds on the floor. His mother returned to the churning

room and saw the mischief he had done. She laughed and went in search of him to scold him. She found him in the store room standing on an overturned mortar and taking out some more butter from a pot and feeding the monkeys which had gathered all around him. He was all the while looking this way and that lest his mother should come and see him. Yasoda now gently crept behind his back with a cane in her hand. As soon as Krishna saw her, he threw away the pot in his hand and ran off pursued by his mother. He ran all about the house laughing aloud and escaping from her when she was about to catch him. Yasoda, also laughing, pursued him wherever he went. Her braid was loosened, the flowers in her hair dropped on the ground and her face became flushed with exertion. At last she overtook him and seized him by the hand. But, seeing that he was frightened at the sight of the cane in her hand, she threw it away, and, as a milder punishment, bound him to the mortar with a strong rope and went away.

Krishna now fell down on all fours and crawled into the garden dragging the wooden mortar with him. He passed between two tall ash trees growing close together and the mortar stuck fast between them. He then tugged at the rope as if to get clear of the obstruction. Immediately the two trees fell down with a crash and two Siddhas came out of them radiant like fire and fell prostrate at the feet of Krishna uttering his praises. These Siddhas were the sons of Kubera, the god of wealth, in their previous lives. They had been cursed by the sage Narada for their pride of wealth and power and transformed into trees. They were now freed from the curse and returned to their former position.

When the Gopas heard the crash of the falling trees, they rushed to the spot and found Krishna tied to the

mortar and tugging at the rope Some of the boys playing near by told them that the trees had fallen on account of Krishna's dragging the wooden mortar between them. But they did not believe it. Nanda, however, laughed and quickly going near his child untied the cord and set him free.

Innumerable and inimitable are the playful exploits recorded of Krishna as a child at Gokula. Once a woman selling fruits passed along the street crying, 'Fruits, good fruits of various kinds! Who will buy?' On hearing the cry, Krishna ran after the seller with grain in the hollow of his tiny hands for buying fruit. All the grain, however, was scattered on the way, and there was none to give the seller when the child reached her. But the woman was moved by the grace and beauty of the child. She filled his hands with fruit and kissed him and went on her way. When she reached home after selling her fruit and took down the basket from her head she found it was full of gems and precious stones in place of grain.

IV

After the crashing of the two ash trees, Nanda and other elderly cowherds of Gokula were alarmed about the welfare of their children and met together to consider the matter. Within a few years they had had several visitations of evil spirits. They had the visitation of Putana. Then came the evil spirit of the loaded waggon. That was followed by the whirlwind. And now they had the crashing of the ash trees. Evidently there was something wrong with Gokula now. Demons and evil spirits seemed to be all about the colony threatening the lives of their children.

Among the assembled men there was an old cowherd by name Upananda. He now addressed the assembly

and said 'Before a more terrible calamity befalls us here, let us take our children and go to some other place with all our belongings. There is a forest called Brindavana not far from this place. It has abundant pasture for our cattle and there is plenty of water at the foot of the hill on the northern side. Let us go there and live in safety.'

His proposal was accepted. In a few days the Gopas gathered their herds of cows and oxen, and loading their bullock carts with their household articles started for Brindavana. They found it was a very beautiful spot with luxuriant vegetation. They drew up their carts and selected a suitable site for themselves and their cattle between the river Yamuna and the Govardhana hill.

In this new colony Krishna and his brother continued to delight the people with their childish sports as at Gokula. In due course they began to graze the calves not far from their homes. They would go into the forest with the children of the other Gopas and play various games with them while the calves were grazing. Sometimes they played on their flutes, sometimes they shot with their slings and sometimes they fought one another imitating the action of enraged bulls and bellowing like them. They imitated the cries of peacocks, cuckoos and other birds and often chattered like monkeys. They played hide and seek among bushes and trees, constructed mock bridges over tiny streams or jumped over forest puddles from bank to bank. Getting up early in the morning and taking their breakfast in their wallets they roamed about the forest tending their calves. And many were the adventures that they met with during these wanderings.

One day there came a demon in the form of a calf with the intention of taking Krishna by surprise and killing him. But Krishna knew him at once and caught him by his hind legs. Then wheeling him round and round he

tree. Krishna lay on a bed of tender leaves placing his head on the lap of a favoured friend while the other boys shampooed his legs and fanned him with large lotus leaves. While he was thus resting, one of his companions said that not far from that place there was an extensive palmyra grove full of delicious fruit. But no one could enter it on account of the presence of a demon, Dhenuka by name, who always roamed about in the form of a wild ass. Not even squirrels and birds dared to enter the grove, though the ground was strewn everywhere with sweet fruit.

Hearing these words, Krishna rose at once and gave the signal to start for that place. They marched together in great spirits. On reaching the grove, Balarama boldly entered it and taking hold of a tree shook it so violently that all its fruit fell down. When the demon heard the noise, he galloped to the spot and raising his hind legs kicked Balarama on the chest and rushed against his companions. When they fell back a little, he brayed in exultation and rushed again towards Balarama to kick him as before. But Balarama was ready for him now. He caught hold of the hind legs of the brute when the latter raised them and whirling the monster round and round struck him against a tree and killed him. The tree fell down with a crash and brought down several other trees beside it. Then all the kith and kin of Dhenuka rushed to the spot and, infuriated by the sight of the corpse of their leader, began to attack the cowherds on all sides. There was now plenty of work for both Balarama and Krishna. They caught hold of the wild asses by their hind legs one after another as they came up to kick them and whirling them round and round dashed them to the ground. In a few minutes the whole place was littered with dead asses. From that day onwards the grove

became accessible to all, and the cattle grazed freely on the luscious grass that grew there.

V

Another day when Balarama was not with him Krishna led his companions to the banks of the Yamuna. The sun was very hot. The cowherd boys, oppressed by the heat, drank the water of the river and at once fell down unconscious. But Krishna revived them all by breathing on their faces and inquired why they had fainted. Some of the boys told him that they had heard there was lower down in the river a deep pool inhabited by a very poisonous serpent called Kaliya. The water there boiled on account of the burning poison of the serpent. They had been told that even birds flying through the air over the pool fell down dead, that, on account of the spray of the poisoned waves, there was no vegetation in the neighbourhood and that any living creature drinking the water met with instantaneous death. They thought that the poison must have spread up to the water they had drunk and made them faint and fall down. 'Let us go there,' said Krishna at once, 'and see the place ourselves.'

Accordingly the boys went along the bank down the stream for several miles and saw the pool with its fearful waves of red and yellow colour. There was no vegetation on the bank except for an old and mighty Kadamba tree whose gnarled roots seem to have resisted the poison of the water. There was no sound of any living creature in the neighbourhood. A deep ominous silence prevailed all over the place, though it was broad day. Krishna now asked his companions to stand at a safe distance and, tightening his girdle, climbed the lofty Kadamba tree on the bank. And from that height suddenly, to the

consternation of his friends he jumped into the pool of poisonous water. He splashed the water with his arms and swam towards the middle of the pool. Now an enormous serpent emerged from the water hissing terribly with all his hundred black hoods and darting a hundred purple tongues. The monster saw what he had never seen before—a tender beautiful boy clad in yellow silk sporting in the water and heading fearlessly towards him with a bewitching smile. He dashed towards the boy coiled himself all around his body and bit him in a hundred places. Krishna remained motionless imprisoned in the serpent's coils and on the bank the cowherd boys and their cows and calves wailed aloud in great distress.

Meanwhile in the colony terrible portents were seen in the sky on the earth and in all the houses. People rushed out inquiring of one another what these meant. They concluded that some misfortune was at hand either to themselves or to their cattle. Nanda and Yasoda remembered that Krishna had gone out that day to graze the cows unaccompanied by Balarama. They were seized with fear and anxiety. When the idea occurred to the cowherds of the colony that Krishna might be in danger, they left their homes and went in search of him. Balarama alone entertained no fear for he knew the might of his brother. He laughed at their anxiety, but said nothing and accompanied them. Men and women now proceeded in search of Krishna following the path indicated by his footprints which they could never mistake. They first reached the place where the cowherd boys had drunk the water of the river and fainted and then traced their steps along the bank far down the stream and saw from a distance Krishna standing motionless in the poisonous waters of the pool, enclosed in the coils of the serpent Kaliya.

And on the edge of the pool they observed his companions crying in agony and all around them their cows and calves running hither and thither and bellowing in distress. The terrible sight overwhelmed the Gopas and Gopis with grief. Some of the women fainted. Yasoda wanted to jump into the pool and reach her son, but she was prevented by others. Some of the stalwart Gopas thought they could rescue Krishna by plunging into the water and swimming towards him and pulling off the snake by its tail. But Balarama said it was sheer madness, for a plunge into the water would mean death for them.

An hour had passed and still Krishna was motionless. The men and women of the colony and their cows and calves looked helplessly on in indescribable grief. Then there was a stir in the water. Krishna was seen to grow in size. Consequently the coils around his body grew tighter and tighter. The serpent felt the strain of enclosing his victim. He tried his best to resist the expanding force of Krishna's body, but he could not. He feared he might snap. The bones of his skeleton creaked, and yet he was unable to counteract the pressure which made his coils wider and wider. A feeling of giddiness came over him. He felt he must relax his hold or die. So he gave up the struggle, released the victim and held up his hoods hissing in violent rage. His eyes were fixed on the boy. His tongues came out and flashed like flames of fire. His nostrils breathed out poisonous spray. He was ready to strike once more at the vital parts of his victim.

But Krishna now began to play with the monster, now approaching him, now receding and now dodging him as he attempted to strike. This dreadful play went on for some time. The people on the bank of the pool were watching it with breathless anxiety. And the serpent, who had already been tired by the strain of keeping the

coils tight round Krishna, began to droop with pain, as he swung this way and that keeping step with him. Krishna now saw his opportunity and jumped on to one of the hoods of Kaliya and began to dance violently on it. When one hood went down unable to bear his weight he jumped on to another till he tired out all the hundred hoods of the enemy. The life of the serpent now began to ebb. He vomited blood, and some of the ruddy drops fell on the feet of Krishna and shone like rubies. Now the whole brood of poisonous snakes in the pool—the wives and the children of Kaliya—came to the surface, and fell prostrate at the feet of Krishna, imploring him, as it were, to spare their lord and master.

Krishna now stopped his dance. The serpent recovered his senses and showed a chastened mood. So Krishna spared his life and ordered him to leave the river at once with all his brood and take his abode in the sea. Kaliya humbly obeyed the order and departed. Thus the river Yamuna was rid of the poison, and its waters throughout its length became a wholesome drink for men and cattle.

VI

Just as he saved his companions and their herds from the poison of Kaliya, Krishna saved them, not long after, from a huge forest fire which had enveloped them on all sides. By all these acts he was recognized by the inhabitants of Brindavana as a god in human form. So he was not only loved but also adored and worshipped by them. As Krishna grew in years he became more and more beautiful in appearance and the music of his flute became irresistible. It is said that, when he played on his flute in the forest, peacocks would dance keeping time with the music, the wild deer would run to him offering worship

with their looks and cows would prick up their ears and stand motionless with tears in their eyes. Even the birds on the branches of trees would listen to the music with unwinking eyes and rivers would cease to flow and stop to listen to the enchanting strains of his flute.

One hot summer day Krishna accompanied by Balarama and other cowherd boys went far from Brindavana grazing cows. The sun was very hot. But the shades of the forest trees on either side of the way protected them from the heat.

'How fortunate are these trees,' said Krishna as they passed underneath them, 'they live only for the good of others. Exposing themselves to the severities of the wind and the sun, of rain and snow, they protect us from these. Their life is the best life, for they sustain other forms of life without expecting anything in return.'

Speaking thus to his friends, Krishna reached the banks of the Yamuna. The water of the river was cool, clear and wholesome. The cowherd boys led their cows to the stream and, after the animals had drunk their fill, they drove them into the glade and began to amuse themselves with their usual sports. When it became midday they were hungry and did not know what to do. They were far away from their colony. They were almost on the borders of the city of Mathura. Then Krishna said to them: 'A short distance from here some Brahmins versed in the Vedas are performing a great sacrifice for the purpose of reaching heaven. Go to their sacrificial hall and, mentioning my name, ask for some food.'

Thus instructed the boys went to the place and asked the Brahmins for food, saying, 'We are the cowherd boys of Brindavana. We have come to you under instructions from Krishna, our leader. He and his brother and their companions are hungry. They want food. You are

foremost among those who know Dharma Please supply those with food who have asked for it '

But the Brahmins turned a deaf ear to them, and went on with their rituals So the boys returned to Krishna disappointed and reported their failure Krishna laughed and said 'Go again my friends, and ask this time the wives of those Brahmins in my name and let us see whether they will give us anything' Accordingly they returned and asked the women to give them food and mentioned Krishna's name Those women had long heard of Krishna and of his miraculous doings and had recognized him as a god on earth So, when they knew that he was so near to them, they filled their vessels with all kinds of delicious food and carried them themselves into the forest When they approached him, Krishna, who knew the devotion of their hearts said Welcome to you, O blessed women I know your hearts I approve of your devotion and accept with pleasure your gifts of food You have long desired to see me and serve me Now that your heart's desire is fulfilled you might go back to the sacrificial halls of your husbands and enable them to complete their sacrifice' They replied 'We know that thou art God Himself in human form The Vedas say that those who have reached the feet of God need not return to the world Pray redeem thine own utterance expressed in the Veda We have sought thy feet and reached them We have no other purpose in life '

But Krishna repeated his advice that they should return home and serve their husbands 'Your devotion has been accepted by me, he said You are now united to me in spirit Mere physical nearness does not make for love or devotion Devotion belongs to the spirit not to the body Therefore go and do your duties faithfully

and be devoted to me in your hearts and you will soon reach me.'

Thus directed by the Lord, the wives of the Brahmins returned to the sacrificial hall and told the Brahmins all that had happened. The men were then seized with a feeling of remorse for having turned a deaf ear to the emissaries of Krishna. 'Alas,' they cried, 'What is the use of our high birth, our investiture with the sacred thread and our initiation into the Gayatri? When He sent His emissaries to us we were not able to recognize them and see His purpose in sending them. All these elaborate sacrifices, rituals and mantras are only for finding Him. And when He actually comes we refuse to see Him and to listen to Him, whereas these women, who are uninitiated and ignorant, have by their simple devotion broken the fetters of their hearts. We are indeed blessed that we have such devoted souls as our companions in life. May the Lord forgive our sins and accept us too!'

VII

One of the most miraculous exploits of Krishna's boyhood celebrated in song and legend is what is known as the lifting of the Govardhana hill. Krishna observed on a certain day his people making elaborate preparations for the worship of their tribal deity, Indra, the god of clouds and rain. He approached Nanda and other elders of the colony and proposed instead that on that day they should honour men who were learned and pious, feed the poor and take their cows and calves in procession round the Govardhana hill, for that hill was their main support. His proposal was accepted and carried out in every detail. The whole colony took part in the celebrations, and sumptuous food with milk and curds was distributed among the poor and all were happy

that Krishna had introduced this innovation. But when the vast procession of men and cattle was marching round the hill after the feeding of the poor, the sky became overcast and, to the accompaniment of thunder and lightning, there was a terrible downpour of rain. The cowherds were overcome with fear that Indra's anger had been roused and that the god was out to destroy them and their cattle. As the minutes passed, their fears became greater. Lightning dazzled their eyes and peals of thunder deafened their ears. The whole village was flooded with water so that the high grounds could not be distinguished from the low, all being submerged. Smitten by torrents of rain and tempestuous gales, the cattle began to shiver with cold, and the cowherds and their women felt almost benumbed. Owing to this sudden and excessive cold the rain developed into a hail storm and began to pelt them as with stones. 'Surely we have done wrong in setting aside the worship of Indra,' they cried. 'rain in this season has never been seen in Brindavana before. Alas, all our cows and calves and our children will be dead in a few hours.'

Krishna now bestirred himself. He shouted to the shivering men and women to keep clear of the hill and go down a little into the valley on that side where the water was not very deep. He then plunged into the water where it was deep and disappeared. The people cried in dismay when he dived and did not come up. The women wailed and blamed the men for having allowed the boy to go near the water. But now a miracle happened. They could not believe their eyes when startled by some rumbling noise they looked this way and that and saw the Govardhana hill going up like a vast umbrella leaving beneath it an extensive area of dry ground. And they found Krishna standing in the centre of the ground.

supporting the whole weight on an uplifted finger of his hand. Seeing him there, they all rushed in and found themselves safe from rain and cold. It is said that Krishna held up the hill for seven days till the rain stopped and the floods subsided. When he saw that the wind had ceased and the sun was shining bright he asked his people to get out of the place with their herds. The hearts of the cowherds were filled with overflowing affection for their saviour. They said that Indra's purpose was foiled and his pride quelled. They came up to Krishna and greeted him with embraces and kisses. The old women of the village joyously marked his forehead with auspicious signs and pronounced benedictions on him and young maidens sang improvised songs on his exploits.

The love which the women of the Vraja bore to Krishna as a result of his exploits as well as of his marvellous beauty and charm was indescribable. It included and went far beyond their love of their own kith and kin, their own brothers and sisters, their own husbands, sons and daughters. It imparted a heavenly sweetness to their daily duties and a heavenly purity to all the feelings of their hearts. They were now assured that he was God in human form and that devotion to him should be the highest aim of their lives. So the call of his flute was to them a call to a higher and diviner life which brooked no delay and which should make them ready for every sacrifice. The poet describes to us how the call came to these blessed women on an autumn night of full moon, how irresistible was the music of Krishna's flute and how their souls went out and danced in ecstasy with the beloved of their hearts on the white sands of the Yamuna, while their bodies slept as usual in their beds at home. Was it only a dream of theirs—a dream in which they met him in the forest alone and he sang to them a heavenly song and

suddenly disappeared and they went searching for him in sorrow and pain for many a weary hour, tormenting themselves with jealousy, and he as suddenly appeared and led them to the sandy bank and they all danced in a circle, not with one Krishna but with many Krishnas, each divine form of his standing between two of them and holding their hands in gracious love—was it all a dream?

CHAPTER VII

THE LEELAS OF KRISHNA (*Continued*)

I

Reports of Krishna's exploits in Brindavana spread far and wide and the people of Mathura came to know that he was the eighth child of Devaki, of whom the heavenly voice had spoken at the time of her marriage with Vasudeva. They had long been groaning under the yoke of the cruel tyrant Kamsa and heard with pleasure that the divine child who was to slay him was growing in strength and beauty on the other side of the Yamuna in the forest colony of Brindavana. While the people were thus rejoicing in the exploits of Krishna and looking forward to the day of deliverance, Kamsa once more imprisoned Vasudeva and Devaki and continued to send one demon after another to put an end to Krishna. We have already seen how Putana and others sent by him, when Krishna was a mere child, failed in their attempts. Kamsa later sent some more demons, one in the form of a mighty bull and another in the form of a wild horse and so on. But they all perished at the hands of Krishna even as the earlier ones had done.

So he devised a new plan. He fixed a date for a great tournament in his capital and sent a formal invitation to the cowherds of Brindavana, through a messenger called Akrura, to come and attend it. He revealed his plan to his messenger. He would station his mighty elephant at the entrance to the lists with instructions to the driver to drive the animal against Balarama and Krishna and other cowherds when they came to enter the lists and crush them to death. If that failed he would make his

court wrestlers—Chanura and Mushtika—challenge Krishna and his brother to a wrestling match and kill them in the contest. But Akrura, like most of Kamsa's subjects, was a man who hated the tyrant and looked upon Krishna as a god in human form. So he went to Brindavana, gave the invitation to Nanda, the chief of the cowherd clan, and revealed the secret plans of Kamsa to Krishna in private. Krishna and his brother laughed when they heard of the tyrant's real intention and encouraged Nanda and the other cowherds to accept the invitation and make preparations for the journey.

When the moment of departure came and the wagons were ready to start with Krishna, Balarama, Nanda and other cowherds, the Gopis, old and young, who looked upon Krishna as the darling of their hearts, wept aloud clinging to the wheels of his carriage. Krishna comforted them all with loving words and said he would return to Brindavana soon after his work in Mathura was over. But they refused to be comforted and with streaming eyes stood motionless gazing at the road until the last speck of dust raised by Krishna's carriage disappeared.

The party reached the banks of the Yamuna in a few hours. They washed their faces in the cool waters of the river, slaked their thirst and rested in their waggon for a while. But Akrura took Krishna's permission and went into the stream to bathe and say his prayers. When he dived into the water, he was surprised to see Krishna sitting there. He rose and looked at the waggon. Krishna was there in the waggon just as he had left him. He dived again and once more he found Krishna beneath the waters. He came up again and saw him as before in the waggon under the tree. He looked on him with wonder and astonishment and dived a third time and saw Krishna as he was in Heaven before he descended into the world

to take a human form. Blinded with the glory of that dazzling form and trembling with fear, he came out of the water and, having composed himself, returned to the waggon a thoroughly altered man. Krishna smiled on him and asked. 'What have you seen, O Akrura, underneath the waters of the Yamuna that you look so bewildered?'

'Lord, thou knowest it,' said Akrura, 'and yet thou askest me. There is nothing more wonderful either underneath the water or on earth or in heaven than thou thyself.'

On the way at every stage people in the villages came to see Balarama and Krishna whose fame had already reached their ears. They were so enamoured of them that they could not take their eyes off them and accompanied them a part of their way. Nanda and other cowherds went in advance and pitched their tents in a garden on the outskirts of Mathura. And by nightfall Krishna and his brother came up and joined them, asking Akrura to go to his own house in the city.

II

Next day Krishna and Balarama accompanied by the Gopas of Brindavana went into the city to see the place where the tournament was to be held. They were greatly impressed with its high walls, the deep moat around them, the spacious streets within, the lofty buildings and the delightful parks. The news that the far-famed sons of Vasudeva had entered the city and were passing through the main street spread like wild-fire. Men and women rushed into the street or crowded into the buildings on either side or climbed to the tops of houses or peered through the windows to have a look at them. They had heard reports of their beauty and their strength

and of their valiant exploits and were longing to see them. They remembered that the heavenly voice had declared years ago that the eighth child from Devaki would be the slayer of Kamsa and the deliverer of Mathura from his tyrannous yoke. Now, when they actually saw him, their hearts were filled with love and admiration. For they found the deliverer to be a boy of tender years, so graceful and so handsome that they longed to take him in their arms and kiss him as their own child.

Meanwhile, acknowledging the salutes of the citizens and enquiring of them the place where the sports were to be held, Balarama and Krishna reached the building where a mighty bow which had to be bent by the competitors on the morrow was kept under guard. Krishna entered the building and amidst the protests of the guards took up the bow in his hands with ease and broke it in the middle into two. The guards thereupon tried to seize him and make him prisoner. Now Balarama and Krishna armed themselves with the two broken bits of the bow and fought their way through the assailants and emerged victorious. Having thus given Kamsa a taste of their might, the brothers returned to their camp for the night.

The wrestling match planned with sinister intent was held on the following day. Kamsa's servants decorated the lists with flags and festoons and at the appointed hour drums were beaten and trumpets sounded. The galleries were crowded with the citizens of Mathura and the people from the countryside. Kamsa came accompanied by his ministers and took his seat in the royal enclosure amidst his feudatory chiefs. Then with a flourish of trumpets the proud wrestlers entered the arena striking their shoulders with their hands and began to show their feats. The spectators were delighted and clapped their hands, whenever they witnessed a difficult

feat performed. But Kamsa was very uneasy in his seat. He had heard of the exploit of Krishna the previous evening and seen a series of bad omens on his way to the tournament that day. He was nervously expecting to see the lad whom Destiny had pronounced to be his slayer and whom he wanted to see slain that evening.

Meanwhile Krishna and Balarama arrived at the gate, and, according to Kamsa's plan, were set on by the mighty elephant, Kuvalayapida. Krishna had seen the animal from a distance and came up with his girdle tightened and his flowing locks tied up. The keeper at once goaded the elephant, and it rushed against Krishna and seized him with its trunk. Krishna slipped out of its hold and hid himself behind the animal's enormous legs. Unable to see him the elephant turned round and round snorting and slashing itself furiously with its trunk. Before it discovered him, Krishna ran behind, caught hold of its tail and dragged the animal back to a great distance and let it go. Then the elephant turned round and began to chase him. Krishna ran some yards and suddenly laid himself on the ground, and when the infuriated brute came near him to gore him to death with its tusks he quickly sprang up and eluded his foe. The elephant, however, struck the ground where Krishna had lain with such terrific force that its tusks broke and fell in pieces. Roaring now with pain it turned round, twisting its trunk in agony. Krishna now suddenly seized the animal by its trunk, dragged it to the ground and despatched it with one of its own broken tusks.

Balarama and Krishna now armed themselves with the broken tusks of the elephant and entered the lists. There was a wild clapping of hands all round the lists when the lads were seen and recognized as the sons of Vasudeva. Kamsa was thunderstruck when he heard the

report that Krishna had just killed the elephant stationed at the gate. The wrestlers stopped their movements and, when the clapping of hands ceased, Chanura came up to the boys and said 'Welcome to the lists O sons of Nanda. It is well known that Gopas whose occupation is to tend cows and calves in the forest, practise wrestling to while away their time and are often great experts in the game. Come show your skill. His Majesty will be greatly pleased. That is why he has specially sent for you.'

'We are greatly obliged to His Majesty for the invitation,' replied Krishna. 'But we are mere boys. You are all professional wrestlers. Do you think it would be fair play? Would not these people assembled here think it an ill matched contest?'

'Oh no,' said the wrestler, 'you are not mere boys. Your exploits are well known. You are now holding in your hands the tusks of the elephant you have just killed. We are not ill matched. Come, try your strength with me O Krishna, and let your brother try his strength with my friend Mushtika here.'

Accepting the challenge of Chanura which was just what Krishna wanted, the two boys proceeded to encounter the two professional wrestlers of the court. It appeared an extremely unfair contest. The spectators protested, especially the women who were struck with the remarkable beauty, tenderness and grace of Krishna and Balarama. They said it was like a contest between rocks and flowers, but their mild protests went unheeded.

While the people were thus tense with excitement and eagerly talking about the outcome of the contest the wrestling match began. The professional wrestlers employed all their traditional devices to overthrow their opponents, but failed. The boys resisted all their attempts

more by their skill, agility and quickness of movement than by their strength and tired them out. When, after a series of futile attempts, the giants were exhausted and were gasping for breath, Balarama and Krishna, who had till now kept their spirits fresh, began to show their strength. Chanura showed less resistance than Mushtika. Krishna suddenly jumped up and clung to his neck, squeezed his throat and brought him down a corpse, while Balarama fought long with Mushtika and repeatedly struck him on his face and chest till he vomited blood and fell on the ground.

When Kamsa saw his champions fall in the lists, he rose in haste from his seat, crying, 'Seize those wicked lads who have killed my wrestlers. Seize them at once and kill them. Seize all the cowherds and put them in chains.' When Krishna heard these words he sprang up and rushed towards the high seat of Kamsa. The latter drew his sword to defend himself against his assailant. There was now great confusion all over the place. Women shrieked and men rushed towards the royal enclosure to part the combatants. But in the twinkling of an eye Krishna went up the dais, seized the hated tyrant by his hair and dragged him down into the arena, and crushed him to death.

Thus the prophecy was fulfilled at last. Kamsa's followers rushed in great rage against Krishna. But Balarama encountered them and despatched them easily. The two brothers then marched triumphantly to the prison where Vasudeva and Devaki had been kept, and liberated them, breaking the prisoners' fetters with their own hands. They then brought out old Ugrasena, the father of Kamsa, from his prison and proclaimed him king. And, finally, they called back all their kinsmen belonging to the clans of Yadus, Vrishnis, Andhakas, Madhus, Dasarkas, Kukuras and others who had fled away from Mathura

for fear of Kamsa and settled them once more in their homes. Peace was thus restored in Mathura.

III

Sometime after this, Vasudeva had both Balarama and Krishna invested with the sacred thread and initiated into the Gayatri mantra by his family priest, Gargacharya. The boys thus became formal students and were sent to study at Ujjain under a famous teacher called Sandipani. They lived under the teacher's roof along with other students for some time and served him with due respect and devotion. The teacher taught them all the branches of learning known in those days. In a remarkably short time they mastered all the arts and sciences necessary for kings and returned home to Mathura, having given every satisfaction to their Guru. A glimpse of the happy life they spent at Ujjain is given to us, when, many years later, Kuchela, a fellow-pupil of Krishna, paid a visit to him at Dwaraka, and the two friends recounted to each other the memories of their student days under Sandipani.

But now, when Krishna returned to Mathura, his first thought was about the cowherds of Brindavana among whom he had spent the happiest days of his boyhood. So he sent a kinsman of his, Uddhava by name, to Brindavana with his message of love to his old friends and elders living there. Then he called on his friend Akrura and requested him to go to Hastinapura and find out how the sons of Pandu, his cousins, were faring at the court of Dhritarashtra after their father's death. Neither Krishna nor Balarama could now afford to leave Mathura, for Jarasandha, the king of Magadha and the father-in-law of Kamsa, had collected a large army and marched against the city to take vengeance on them for the death of Kamsa. They now mustered their forces, drilled them

anew and infused their own spirit into them and led them against the enemy. The armies met in a wide field not far from the city walls. Krishna's forces fought desperately for their hearths and homes and routed the army of Jarasandha and chased them from the field. The king of Magadha was so badly beaten in the battle that he did not want to go back to his capital. So he retired to a forest settlement and wanted to abdicate. But he was dissuaded from taking this step by his allies and taken to his capital, where he soon began to make preparations for another invasion.

Jarasandha invaded Mathura not once or twice, but eighteen times in all and was defeated by Krishna every time except the last. When the last expedition was about to start, a new enemy appeared on the scene against Mathura. One Kala-Yavana, a foreign chief, came with a large army and laid siege to the city. After defeating him, Krishna and Balarama did not like to expose their subjects any more to the horrors of war. They had already suffered terribly by the repeated invasions of Jarasandha. Therefore the princes built an impregnable island city called Dwaraka off the coast of the western sea and shifted their capital there and helped all the citizens of Mathura to migrate with their families to the new city. Before this migration was completed, Jarasandha led his last expedition and found very little resistance to his army. Krishna and Balarama, together with the remnants of their followers, abandoned the city after some fighting and retired to their new capital. Later on, we learn from the Mahabharata, when the Pandava chief, Yudhishthira, was about to celebrate the Rajasuya sacrifice, Krishna and his cousins, Bhima and Arjuna, went to the capital of Jarasandha and challenged him to a duel. Jarasandha consented to fight with Bhima

and was overpowered and killed by him—at Krishna's bidding. But we are anticipating events.

IV

Just as Gokula is associated with Krishna's childhood, Brindavana with his boyhood and Mathura with his youth, so is Dwaraka associated with his manhood. This impregnable island city remained his capital to the end of his life on earth and then it became submerged under the sea. Soon after the settlement of the Yadava clans in the new capital came the romantic marriage of Krishna with Rukmini.

Rukmini was the daughter of Bhishmaka, the king of Vidarbha. She had five brothers, the eldest of whom was Rukmi, who was a headstrong and cruel prince. Having heard of the extraordinary beauty, strength and valour of Krishna, she fell in love with him and ever cherished his image in her heart. Krishna knew it and returned her love. She was a princess in every way worthy of him. By her modesty, charm and single-minded devotion she made herself a favourite among her relatives and they all approved of her choice—all except her eldest brother, Rukmi, who wanted to give her in marriage to Sisupala, the ruler of Chedi. When Rukmini came to know the intentions of her brother, she was greatly troubled in mind. For she knew the character of her brother. She knew that when he made up his mind to do a thing he would do it even by trampling on the sacred feelings of a sister. So to guard herself against the hateful marriage contemplated by him, she sent a trusted Brahmin messenger to Krishna in secret with the following message:

'O valiant Prince, beloved of my heart' I have heard of you and dreamt of you and chosen you as my Lord. I have surrendered myself to you, heart and soul. Come

Meanwhile at Kundina, the king of Vidarbha had yielded to the wishes of his eldest son and arranged for the marriage of Rukmini with Sisupala. Invitations had been sent to all the neighbouring kings including Balarama and Krishna. The necessary preparations were made, and, as the wedding day approached, the roads of the capital were swept clean, ornamental arches were erected in all important places, flags were hoisted on all houses, and men and women gaily dressed thronged in the streets to see the procession of the bride going to the temple of Parvati outside the city. The bridegroom's party had also arrived with a large contingent of armed men, horses, elephants and chariots. Also, Sisupala's allies, Jarasandha, Dantavakra, Paundraka and a host of others had come with their retinue. They were all enemies of the Yadava clan. When Balarama heard of this assemblage of kings and their retinue at Kundina and came to know also that Krishna had gone alone in his chariot to rescue the fair princess of Vidarbha, he set out with a large army so as to be prepared for all contingencies.

During all this time the Princess sat alone in her apartment yearning for the Beloved of her heart and anxious for the return of her messenger. There were only a few hours before her. Her attendants would then come to prepare her for the procession. Tears welled up in her eyes as she thought of the possibility of the Prince of Dwaraka not coming in time. What if he arrived too late? Why had she not thought of sending her messenger a few days earlier? Why had she waited till the last moment? Did this Brahmin reach Dwaraka at all? Or was he still lingering on the way?

While she was tormenting herself with these reflections, her messenger noiselessly entered the room and

here soon and claim me as your own. O lion among men, come here soon, lest a jackal should touch what belongs by right only to a lion. I know you are unconquerable in battle. Come here a day before the date fixed for my marriage with the hateful ruler of Chedi, rout him and his allies and take me away as the prize of your valour. Do not think that it would be difficult to carry away a princess from her palace without killing her attendants and her kith and kin. I will tell you of a device. On the day preceding the wedding it is the custom in our family for a bride to go in procession to the temple of Parvatî outside the city. You may easily lie in wait for me outside the city and capture me and take me away when I go to the temple or when I return from it. If you should fail to come and rescue me on that day, I am determined to cast off this body and quit this world. I may have to take a hundred births before I have my heart's desire. But a day is bound to come, my beloved Lord, when I shall succeed in being united with you in holy wedlock.'

The Brahmin messenger went to Dwaraka, delivered Rukmini's message to Krishna and explained to him all the circumstances. He concluded by saying that there was no time to be lost. On hearing these words, Krishna sprang to his feet and, clasping the Brahmin's hands in his own, exclaimed: 'O good messenger, I know the heart of the Princess of Vidarbha. And she shall know mine. Her brother hates me, for he is in league with Sisupala and Jarasandha. But he will see what I can do.' And then he thundered to his charioteer: 'Daruka, get my chariot ready at once.'

When the chariot was ready, he asked the Brahmin to get into it with him and drove off to Kundina, the capital of Vidarbha.

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flowers, fruits and cocoanuts, camphor and incense, scented balls of sandal and turmeric, rose water and attar and perfumes of various kinds. Facing the bride and moving backwards, there were musicians playing on instruments of different kinds, and bands of minstrels singing the praises of the royal family of Vidarbha. The procession marched slowly along the main street, while from houses on either side girls showered flowers and parched rice on the bride.

Reaching the temple at last the procession stopped, and all made way for the Princess to go into the shrine. Rukmini now washed her feet and hands and entered the sanctuary, devout and serene. Aged women well-versed in the ritual, assisted by the temple priests, guided her in worshipping the goddess. They made her bow before the great god Siva first and then before Gauri and suggested to the bride to offer a silent prayer in her heart for the long life and prosperity of the bridegroom who was to marry her. The bride bowed low, her lips trembled, and there were tears in her eyes as she prayed, 'O mother divine, I bow at Thy feet again and again. Bless me, I pray, so that the desire of my heart may be fulfilled. Bless me, I pray, so that Krishna, the Beloved of my heart, may become my husband.' Having concluded her worship the Princess issued out of the shrine holding the hand of one of her girl companions.

By this time all the kings who had been invited to the marriage as well as the father and the brother of the bride had assembled outside the temple to join in the procession back to the palace. The beauty of the bride stunned the warriors, who saw her for the first time. They forgot themselves and sat staring in their chariots. The Princess raised her eyes, bashfully surveyed the throng and saw right in front of her the Beloved of her

found Rukmini sitting like a goddess rapt in thought. He made a slight noise to attract her attention. She started and looked up. His countenance showed her at once that there was nothing to fear. She rose with a bright smile and a questioning look. He told her that the prince had already arrived and that her plan would be carried out. Her heart leapt with joy and she bent down and touched the feet of the Brahmin in overflowing gratitude.

When the king of Vidarbha heard that Balarama and Krishna had come, he went forth to receive them with trumpets blowing, though his son refused to take part in the reception. The rumour that the far-famed Prince of Dwaraka had unexpectedly arrived spread like wild-fire among the citizens of Kundina and large crowds assembled near his lodgings to have a glimpse of him. On seeing his matchless form the people said to themselves: 'No wonder they say he is a god. A mere human prince cannot have such a dazzling form.' And some who had heard of the feelings of Rukmini said: 'It is a pity indeed that her brother did not consent to an alliance with the Prince of Dwaraka. It would have been an ideal marriage. Poor Rukmini! She wanted to possess a heavenly swan, she gets only a swarthy crow. But who can overcome Fate?'

While the crowds were thus speaking among themselves, the bride duly decked came out of her palace and the procession started for the temple of Parvati outside the city walls. Rukmini moved in perfect silence surrounded by the ladies of the palace and her girl friends and companions. Soldiers in uniform, armed with shining weapons, guarded the procession both before and behind. Surrounding the bride and her companions there were hundreds of women carrying in vessels of gold and silver various offerings and articles of worship—garlands of

flowers, fruits and cocoanuts, camphor and incense, scented balls of sandal and turmeric, rose water and attar and perfumes of various kinds. Facing the bride and moving backwards, there were musicians playing on instruments of different kinds, and bands of minstrels singing the praises of the royal family of Vidarbha. The procession marched slowly along the main street, while from houses on either side girls showered flowers and parched rice on the bride.

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heart in a chariot drawn by four milk-white horses. Their eyes met. She instinctively looked down, a thrill passed through her frame, and before she knew what had happened she was seized by the waist, lifted bodily from the ground and borne triumphantly to the chariot on Krishna's shoulder. The on-lookers were petrified with astonishment. Before they recovered from their surprise, the wheels of the chariot rolled, the horses were set on a gallop and the bride was carried away, strongly guarded at the back by the Yadava army.

The enraged kings who were left behind were now led by Jarasandha, the old enemy of Krishna. They pursued the running chariot with armies of their own. Jarasandha hoped to pay off old scores, kill Krishna and rescue the bride for Sisupala, his friend and ally. But the pursuing armies were soon stopped by the Yadava army of Balarama who turned round to fight them. There was now a pitched battle between the two forces. The Princess in Krishna's chariot closed her eyes unable to look on. Krishna smiled and said to her: 'Fear not, O Princess. It will be over in a few minutes. My men are ready and will drive them away soon.'

The Yadavas found it easy indeed to drive away Jarasandha, Sisupala and others, because these kings had come unprepared for such resistance. But Balarama and Krishna were not allowed to go much farther on their victorious march. For the Prince of Vidarbha, the eldest brother of the bride, now came up with a picked troop of armed men and hurling insults on Krishna asked him to surrender. A fight ensued between the Yadavas and his army, and many of his men were slain. While the fight was going on, the Prince rashly sprang upon Krishna's chariot with a drawn sword threatening to kill him. Krishna now rose from his seat caught hold of the

man with one hand and struck down his sword and was about to run him through, when the Princess intervened and begged her lover to spare the life of her brother. Thereupon Krishna desisted, but cut off the hair on the head and the face of the enemy as a punishment for the foul language he had used and bound him down to the chariot with a piece of cloth. By this time the Yadava warriors returned having routed the prince's army and laughed to see the disfigured prisoner bound to the chariot. But at the instance of Balarama, who was pained to see the prince of Vidarbha in that pitiable plight, Krishna set him free. The unfortunate prince dared not show his face in Kundina after this humiliation, but took his residence in another town and vowed that he would not enter the capital till he had killed Krishna and rescued Rukmini from his hands.

Meanwhile Krishna, accompanied by his victorious Yadava army, reached Dwaraka safe. And amidst scenes of wild enthusiasm, which lasted for many weeks, his marriage with Rukmini was duly celebrated.

V

The life of Krishna at Dwaraka after his marriage with Rukmini was a long period of unclouded happiness. It was during this period that he carried out the great purpose of his life, the re-establishment of Dharma on a universal basis. This he did by the part he played in the great war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas on the field of Kurukshetra and by the comprehensive teaching of his Bhagavad Gita. But we have already referred to this part of Krishna's life in our chapter on the Mahabharata. However as an illustration of the happy, serene and beneficent life led at Dwaraka by Krishna and

Rukmini after their marriage, we may give the following well-known incident described in the Bhagavata Purana.

There lived in a small village a Brahmin named Kuchela. He was a great friend of Krishna, both having lived together as students in the house of the sage Sandipani at Ujjain. Kuchela possessed a sound knowledge of the sacred scriptures and was free from attachment to worldly objects. He had an even mind and had full control over his senses. Although he was a householder, living with his wife and children, he had no worldly ambitions. He was contented with what he had. But unfortunately he was very poor. He and his family had seldom a full meal, and they had not even sufficient clothing to cover themselves with. In fact, the Brahmin had come to be known as Kuchela on account of the rags he wore. His wife was thin and emaciated through overwork and starvation. But she never complained, as she was extremely devoted to her husband and did not like to cause him any unhappiness. Kuchela used to tell her stories of his student life under Sandipani and of his great love for Krishna, his fellow student in those days. He would say to her: 'You have only to see him, my dear, and you will at once say that he is a god on earth. Such beauty, such love, such cheerfulness and charm, such courage and valour have never been seen in union in the world before. He was foremost in everything, and we were all passionately fond of him. We used to call him a prince among men long before we knew that he was actually a prince, the grandson of the king of Mathura. I hear he and his people have now migrated to an island in the western sea and have built a new capital called *Dwaraka*. *Oh! wherever he is, he will always be a prince among men.* I can never forget the happy days I spent in his company at Ujjain.'

Having heard such accounts of Krishna from Kuchela times without number, one day his wife said to him: 'If Krishna, the prince of Dwaraka, is such a great friend of yours, why don't you go and see him? When he learns that we are living in such poverty he may give us some relief.' Kuchela did not agree at first, for he did not like to speak of his poverty to others. But when his wife repeatedly pressed her request, he yielded and at last made up his mind to go to Dwaraka and see his friend. He asked her whether there was anything in the house which he could take with him as a present to his old friend. There was, of course, nothing in the house, as they had all been practically starving for some days. The wife, however, borrowed of a neighbour a handful of beaten rice and gave it in a bundle to be presented to Krishna.

Kuchela took the bundle and his staff and started for Dwaraka on foot. He went by stages, for he had to walk many a mile to reach the island city on the west coast. Foot-sore and weary he reached at last his destination. Dwaraka was a city of palaces far more beautiful and grand than those of Ujjain which he had seen in his student days. With great difficulty he gained access along with other Brahmins to the royal enclosure in the centre of the city. He had to pass through three camps of guards and three high protective walls before reaching the mansions occupied by the Vrishni chiefs. In the centre of the innermost ring of mansions was the palace of Krishna and Rukmini—built of white marble and furnished with unparalleled magnificence.

With great trepidation the poor Brahmin in his ragged clothes entered the hall into which he was led by Krishna's liveried servants. At the other end of the hall on a couch of gold adorned with a canopy of silk inlaid

with gems of various colours Krishna was seated with Rukmini by his side. As soon as Krishna saw the Brahmin at the entrance he rose and rushed to him and affectionately folded him in his arms. Then taking him by the hand he led him to the couch and made him sit by his side and asked Rukmini to bring water and other articles necessary for performing the rites of hospitality to the honoured guest. And when these were brought Krishna himself washed the feet of the guest and offered him flowers and fruit. Rukmini joined her husband in serving Kuchela by gently fanning him with a jewelled fan. The royal household were astonished to see a ragged Brahmin so lovingly honoured by Krishna and Rukmini.

While the guest was taking the refreshments set before him, Krishna put him various questions about the life he led after both of them had left their preceptor's house. He asked him whether he had married, whether he had children and how he spent his time. The Brahmin gave only brief replies to the questions put to him. Then Krishna began to recall the happy days they had spent together as students under Sandipani on the outskirts of Ujjain.

'O my friend,' said he, 'do you remember how one day, when we were living together in the house of our Guru, we were both asked by our Holy Mother, his wife, to bring fuel? You remember we entered a thick forest and were caught in a violent storm of wind and rain. Darkness came on while we were still in the forest. As the ground was soon covered with water we could not recognize any landmarks and lost our way. We wandered in the forest throughout the night in great fear and confusion holding each other's hands and exposed to the wind and rain. Our Guru at home spent an anxious night when he learnt that we had not returned from the

forest and came in search of us at sunrise and discovered us at last in a bewildered state and said to us "My dear boys you have been put to great hardship on my account I am greatly pleased with your devotion to me May all the knowledge you have acquired from me be ever fresh in your memories, may it never fail you in life! There were tears in his eyes as he spoke these words and we bowed down and touched his feet O my friend, numerous incidents of this kind occurred during our student life in our Guru's house'

'Those were the happiest days in my life, O Prince said Kuchela 'Having loved you and lived with you in our Guru's house I desire nothing more in this world My life's object, it seems to me was attained long ago when I had you for companion and fellow disciple O beloved Krishna'

'I know, my friend, how much you loved me, remarked Krishna 'And I see you are not changed in any way Out of your love for me you have walked all the way from your village to this place to see me Come let me see Have you brought me any gift, my friend?

Kuchela shrank within himself when he was asked this question He was ashamed of the bundle of beaten rice he had brought with him He had been hiding it under his clothing But Krishna now pulled his clothes and discovered the bundle and said 'I see, my friend, you have brought me something Why are you hiding it?'

With these words he snatched it from the Brahmin and untying the bundle took the parched grain and ate it with great relish saying 'This handful of rice is more valuable to me than all the costly gifts which visitors bring to me in their thousands every day, for the gifts of love are far superior to mere form and ceremony'

The Brahmin spent some days in Krishna's palace and felt as happy as if he were in heaven. It was not the luxuries of the palace that gave him this happiness, but the warmth of love shown by his friend. All the old passionate feeling he had for the prince of his heart in his student days came back to him. Sweet memories were revived. He was steeped in bliss.

On the day on which Kuchela started for home from Dwaraka, Krishna accompanied him for some distance hand in hand, spoke to him affectionately, bowed and took leave of him. The Brahmin walked on in great happiness. Suddenly he remembered that he had totally forgotten the main object of his journey. He had not asked anything of his friend and he had not received anything. He was going back home just as he came. What was he to say to his wife who would be expecting him to bring her something which would relieve the family from want? His friend had seen his condition and yet he had not given him anything.

'Poor as I was,' said the Brahmin to himself, 'Krishna must have thought that wealth would turn my head and spoil me. I think he has really done me an act of grace by withholding the temptations of wealth from me. On the other hand he has overwhelmed me with his loving-kindness. Is not his love worth more than all the wealth of the world?'

Musing in this manner all the way, the Brahmin reached his village. He entered the familiar dusty street at the end of which he lived in his thatched hut. He trudged along the street and found to his surprise a lofty mansion with a big compound where his hut used to be. There was a beautiful garden all around it with well-laid walks and green bowers. He was puzzled and said to himself: 'Whose mansion is this? And where is my house? Where am I? Have I lost my way?'

As he stood in the street thus bewildered, a lady richly dressed, stepped out of the mansion. It was his own wife. She welcomed him home. The Brahmin was astonished and asked his wife what had happened during his absence.

'What! Don't you know?' she replied. 'Don't you know that all this is due to the grace of Krishna, your friend? Come in and see your children. How happy they are!'

Kuchela went in and saw the abundance of riches of all kinds that had come to him and the transformation that his family had undergone during his absence. He then reflected thus:

'My beloved friend is more generous than the cloud, which, though full of water, does not choose to rain in the sight of the peasant, but inundates his field while he is asleep. The noble minded Prince has accepted with great delight my trifling gift of a handful of beaten rice and has returned it to me a million fold. I have no need of so much wealth. But I have great need of the love and grace of Krishna which to me is more than riches. The Lord knows how the intoxication of wealth and power brings about the fall of many a rich man in this world. Perhaps it is only out of his compassion that he often refuses to grant the prayers of short sighted men for wealth and power.'

Reflecting thus on his change of fortune, the Brahmin lived amidst his wealth without any attachment to it and was supremely happy in his love and in his contemplation of the Supreme.

VI

Krishna is the Beloved of India. No stones are more popular in this country than those of his childhood and

youth and no scripture is more popular than the Bhagavad Gita which he taught to Arjuna on the field of Kurukshetra. But the very popularity of this great Avatar has led to the creation of numerous legends not always at the highest level. Allowance has also to be made for the gross exaggerations, the lapses from good taste and the insatiable thirst for the miraculous and the supernatural which are the characteristics of all popular literature of ancient times. But no exaggerations, no corruptions of texts and no fanciful legends can obscure the outlines of the great Incarnation of God which gave the Hindus their Bhagavad Gita.

CHAPTER VIII

FOUR FAMOUS LEGENDS FROM THE PURANAS

I

The Legend of Dhruva

King Uttanapada, the son of Svayambhuva Manu, had two wives, Suniti and Suruchi. By Suniti he had a son called Dhruva, and by Suruchi he had another son called Uttama. The king loved Suruchi more than Suniti. One day in the presence of his favourite wife, he took her young son Uttama in his lap and fondled him. The other boy Dhruva saw this and wanted his father to take him also into his lap. But his stepmother intervened and sharply rebuked him and said that her son alone was entitled to that honour. Dhruva thereupon went crying to his mother and told her what had happened. But the humble Suniti replied that she and her son were unfortunate and hence should meekly submit to their fate and put up with insults from those who were the favourites of fortune.

'But if you still feel hurt, my boy,' she concluded, 'at the words of Suruchi your stepmother, try to acquire religious merit which will bring you better fortune. Be pious, be amiable, be friendly, be kind to all living creatures. And then good fortune will come to you.'

'Yes, mother,' said the proud boy, 'you will see what I will do. Let Uttama get the throne from my father, I will, by my own exertions, obtain a rank far higher than even my father's. I will attain to a place where I shall be respected by the whole world.'

Having said these words, Dhruva left his mother's house and went away to a forest. There he saw seven

holy sages sitting on antelope skins and performing tapas. He bowed before them in reverence and told them that he had come to them because he was dissatisfied with the world and its ways. He then related his story. The sages then asked him what he wanted of them. Dhruva replied:

'I do not want riches, O holy sages. Nor do I want dominion. What I want is an elevated rank, such as no one has attained before. Tell me what I must do to win this.'

The seven holy sages looked at one another and declared with one voice:

'Anything, dear child, that the mind of man desires may be obtained by worshipping Vishnu, the God of gods—anything even though it be the station that is the highest in the three worlds.'

'Instruct me then, O good sages,' pleaded Dhruva, 'how I may worship that God of gods.'

'Listen, O royal child,' said the sages, 'this is what you have to do. Draw away your mind, first, from all outside objects, and then fix it steadily on that Eternal Being in whom this world exists. When your mind is thus wholly filled by that one Being, repeat this silent prayer—"Glory to the Supreme, whose essence is divine wisdom and whose form is this universe."'

'Desist from this fearful penance, my son ' she cried, 'you are only five years old, my child This is not the proper age for penance You are my only solace Why have you left me? I am alone You know how unhappy is my life Come, my child, protect me against the taunts of Suruchi Bring a gleam of sunshine into my heart Your first duty is to make your mother happy Come, my boy, O come If you don't come, I will take my life here before you '

But Dhruva, being wholly absorbed in God, did not see his mother weeping before him Nor did he hear her cries So this illusion vanished from his presence Then the gods tried to shake him with terrors of various kinds Hideous monsters with the faces of crocodiles and the bodies of camels yelled and roared around him Hundreds of goblins rushed on him crying, 'Kill him, cut him to pieces and eat him ' And frightful Rakshasas brandishing terrible weapons thronged round him threatening him with instantaneous death But none, of these spectres made any impression upon the senses of the boy whose mind was completely absorbed in God Dhruva was engrossed in one idea and one idea only He beheld God without interruption He saw no other object

The gods were now alarmed Their attempts to shake the resolution of the boy had all failed So they went to the great God Vishnu and complained 'As the moon increases in his orb day by day, so does this lad advance towards superhuman power by his penance We do not know to what station he is aspiring We do not know whether he wants to become an Indra, or a sun god or a guardian deity of the earth Divert him, O Lord from persevering in his penance

The God of gods assured them that Dhruva wanted neither the rank of Indra, nor the solar sphere, nor the

sovereignty of the earth or the ocean. 'I know what my devotee wants,' He said. 'And I will grant it to him and stop his penance. You need not be alarmed. Return, therefore, O gods, to your respective spheres and do your duties.' '

After the gods had retired, Vishnu came down, swift as thought, to Dhruva, and appearing before him in the form in which the boy had worshipped Him, said: 'I am pleased with your devotion, O son of Uttanapada. What do you want? You may ask for a boon from me.' The boy opened his eyes and saw before him the very form he had meditated upon and worshipped all through his long penance. A thrill passed through his body. His hair stood on end. His mind was overwhelmed. He did not know what to say. He remained speechless for a few moments and then exclaimed :

'If, O Lord, thou art pleased with my devotion, let this be my reward—that I may know how to praise thee. I am a mere child and can find no words to glorify thee as I wish. My heart is overflowing with love and devotion. Grant me, O Lord, the power by which I can worthily lay my adorations at thy feet.'

The Lord was pleased with this request of the boy and touched him graciously on the head with His sacred conch, and immediately Dhruva burst into a long hymn of praise such as no tongue of man had uttered before. When the boy had finished, the Lord once again asked him to disclose the wish of his heart. Then Dhruva replied :

'Thou, O Lord, dost abide in the hearts of all. How could I cherish any wish in my heart unknown to thee? Thou dost only want my confession. I confess I want neither the rank of Indra, nor the solar sphere, nor the sovereignty of the earth or the ocean. When I left my

home and began to make penance thou knowest that I wanted an elevated position such as no one had attained before I do not know what that position is It is for thee, O Lord, to decide I surrender myself wholly to thee '

The God of gods then said to Dhruva 'The station that you ask for you shall surely obtain Rightly have you not asked for Indra's heaven, O Dhruva, for what is heaven to one who has fixed his mind on Me? A higher station shall be assigned to you—a station in which you will sustain the stars and the planets It is a station above that of the sun and the moon In the form of the ever constant Pole star you will be an example for all time of what a man by the constancy of his devotion can attain to Your mother Suniti shall likewise dwell in the orb of a star and remain near you for all time But you have, first of all, to go back to your father, be reconciled to your stepmother and act as the guardian of your brother Your father is old He is very unhappy because you left him He is longing to meet you You have to go and relieve him of the cares of his kingdom and rule the country for a long time according to the laws of Dharma and then, in due course, you will come to occupy the place in the heavens that has now been assigned to you '

Having said these words, the God of gods disappeared Dhruva bowed low and returned home He was eagerly welcomed by his father, mother and stepmother He carried out all the divine commands to the very letter, and after a very long reign attained at last to the place assigned to him in the skies He still shines as the Pole star in the sky and beside him shines his mother Suniti in the orb of a star of lesser magnitude

II

The Legend of Prahlada

Hiranyakasipu, the king of the Daityas, having got a boon from Brahma that he could not be slain by man or beast, made himself so powerful in all the three worlds by his violence that he could not brook the idea of an Almighty God ruling this universe. He looked upon all those who believed in God as his enemies. His enslaved subjects were so afraid of his tyranny that they worshipped him as God and gave up all their religious usages. All their temples were destroyed and their scriptures burnt. By a royal decree religion was forbidden to be taught in any home or school. No citizen could, save on pain of death, mention the name of God to his children. Throughout the kingdom, the agents of Hiranyakasipu encouraged in his subjects the belief that there was no power on earth or in heaven higher than their king.

Hiranyakasipu had a son Prahlada by name. The boy was sent to a teacher's house to be educated. He lived there *for some years and was instructed in all the arts befitting a prince of his rank.* While his education was still going on, he once paid a visit to his father along with his teacher. He duly bowed before his father's feet and was bidden to rise and give the substance of what he had learnt so far.

'This is the substance, O father, of all that I have learnt,' said Prahlada. 'I have learnt to adore Him who is without beginning, middle or end—the imperishable Lord of the world, the Universal First Cause.'

On hearing these words the king of the Daityas sprang up from his seat, his eyes red with anger and his lips quivering with emotion. He turned to the teacher and asked him in thundering tones why he had taught his boy to utter such nonsense.

'O King of the Daityas' replied the teacher, 'do not give way to passion. That which your son has uttered has not been taught by me. I am as much surprised as you are at what he has said.'

Hiranyakasipu now turned to the lad and demanded, 'By whom then have you been taught this vile lesson? Your teacher here denies that he has taught it.'

'The God of gods, O father,' answered Prahlada, 'is the instructor of the whole world. His teaching is there on rocks and trees, in the sky and the ocean, and, most of all, in the face of man.'

'Is this boy mad?' exclaimed Hiranya, and, shaking him fiercely by his shoulders, demanded once more, 'Who is this God of gods whom you so impertinently mention before me—me who am the sovereign of the three worlds?'

'The glory of that God cannot be described,' answered Prahlada fearlessly, 'It is only to be meditated upon by the devout. He is the Supreme Lord. All things proceed from Him and abide in Him.'

'Are you desirous of death, you fool,' thundered his father, 'that you dare give the title of Supreme Lord to any one other than me while I am here?'

'The Almighty God is the creator, protector and destroyer of all beings,' gently stated Prahlada, 'He is the Lord of all—even of you, father. Why should you be offended?'

The King of the Daityas then exclaimed, 'What evil spirit has entered the heart of this silly boy, that he thus, like a man possessed, utters these profane words before me?'

'Not into my heart alone,' answered his son, 'but into the hearts of all has the great God entered. He pervades us all. It is by His power that we live and move that we think and speak—you as well as I.'

'Away with this wretch,' cried Hiranya unable to bear it any longer. 'Take him away to his preceptor's house. And let the preceptor come and see me again. I won't speak to him now.'

According to the commands of the king, Prahlada was conducted back to the house of his preceptor. He lived there and, though he was not taught anything about God, progressed daily in his knowledge of Him. After a considerable time had elapsed, Hiranyakasipu sent for him again, and, on his arrival, asked him to recite any good verses he had learnt. Prahlada immediately recited the following:

'May He from whom all that moves and all that moves not originates, He who is the cause of all this creation, both animate and inanimate,—may He, the God of gods, be gracious unto us!'

On hearing these words, Hiranyakasipu exclaimed: 'Kill this wretch. He does not deserve to live. He is growing worse and worse. He is a disgrace to my family, and a traitor to my kingdom.'

Obedient to the king's orders his attendants rushed on the prince, threatening him with their flashing swords. But Prahlada looked on them calmly and said: 'As the God of gods, O Daityas, is present in these weapons of yours, as well as in my body, they cannot hurt me.'

'Let us see,' said Hiranyakasipu himself and drew his sword and struck the prince. Prahlada did not feel the least pain. The king's sword failed to give him even a scratch. Hiranyakasipu was enraged and struck his son repeatedly, but failed to produce any impression on his son's body. He then tried to persuade Prahlada to refrain from glorifying Him whom he called the God of gods and said that, if he should be so foolish as to persevere, he would be subjected to unendurable tortures. But his

son replied that he felt no fear, because the immortal guardian of the lowly and the helpless resided in his heart

Hiranyakasipu was exasperated at this reply and cried 'Put this wretch in chains and convey him to a dungeon Let him await my pleasure there' Prahlada was accordingly led away in chains and thrown into a dark dungeon The tyrant could not brook a traitor in his own family If his son rebelled against him and set aside his orders, his rule would be in constant peril The danger must be nipped in the bud Else it might spread over the whole kingdom and result in his overthrow. So he suppressed every trace of natural feeling in himself and began to devise gruesome tortures which would bring the young rebel to his senses The old books say that Hiranyakasipu gave orders that Prahlada be thrown among poisonous serpents, trampled upon by furious elephants and scorched to death by raging flames till he yielded But these tortures were of no avail As the boy concentrated his mind on the God of his heart, neither the poison of the serpents nor the tusks of the elephants nor the tongues of flames could hurt his body

While the tyrant was thinking of what he should do next, a certain class of sorcerers went to him and said that they would undertake to bring up the boy in the manner desired by his father and that, if they too failed, he might devise fresh tortures Hiranyakasipu agreed and freed Prahlada from his prison The sorcerers took the boy to their house and did their best by means of arguments to prove to him that there was no God that the world was the result of natural forces, that there was no life beyond death and that good and evil were only matters of convenience Prahlada listened calmly to their arguments and advanced counter arguments and proved to them how false their teachings were Not

satisfied with this, he proceeded to teach true religion to the sons of these men. He would say to them: 'Hear from me, O sons of Daityas, the supreme truth. This world is fleeting and full of pain. But take it from me there is a God of gods behind this world. He is not fleeting. He abides for ever. If we fix our minds and hearts on Him, we can rise above the pleasures and pains of this world and laugh at every care and be happy for ever. This universe that we see is only a manifestation of the God of gods. He lives in the hearts of all things and beings. Let us therefore lay aside the angry passions of our race, love all creatures and seek the God within our souls. Let us strive to obtain that supreme happiness which is beyond the power of this world to give and which every one who fixes his mind on God will surely enjoy.'

me, the fires that scorched me and the men that poisoned my food have been truly regarded by me as my friends, if I have been unshaken in my soul and if I am pure and guiltless in Thy sight—then I implore Thee, let these Daitya sorcerers be restored to life'

The magicians immediately rose up uninjured and happy. They bowed respectfully before the Prince and blessed him that he might live long and be happy. They then went to the king and narrated to him all that had happened.

Hiranyakasipu once again sent for his son and asked him by what counter magic he was able to send back the creation of the magicians upon themselves and afterwards save them from destruction.

'How have you acquired these marvellous powers, Prahlada? asked his father. 'Or did you possess them even at your birth, unknown to any of us?'

'Whatever power I possess father, is neither the result of magic,' replied the youth, 'nor a faculty of nature. It is no more than that which is possessed by all whose hearts recognize the God of gods abiding in them. He who thinks no evil of others, but considers them as himself, is ever free from fear. But he who inflicts pain upon others in thought, speech or act sows the seed of trouble for himself. I wish no evil to any, and speak or do no offence. For I see the same God in all beings, as in my own soul. How could pain inflicted by any agent of yours affect me whose heart is filled with the Eternal Being and whose eye sees the same Lord everywhere? It is no magic, father, that overcomes evil but love, boundless love to all creatures love which flows from the vision of God in all things.'

The face of Hiranyakasipu darkened with fury as he listened to these words and he commanded his servants

to hurl the prince down from the summit of the palace where he was sitting so that his body might be dashed to pieces on the rocks below. The Daityas accordingly hurled him down, and he fell cherishing the God of gods in his heart. But the earth, the nurse of all creatures, received him gently in her lap. Seeing that the boy was uninjured by the fall and was sound in every limb, the tyrant flew into a rage and ordered him to be bound with strong bonds and thrown into the sea. The Daityas carried out his orders and came to the king and reported that the boy was floating on the waters and that the ocean was convulsed to its very depths and threatening to submerge the earth. Then Hiranyakasipu ordered them to hurl rocks into the sea and pile them in heaps upon Prahlada so that he might be buried under their weight.

‘He is no son of mine, but a perpetual curse unto me and my kingdom,’ exclaimed the king. ‘Since he cannot die, let him live a thousand years at the bottom of the sea underneath these piles of rocks.’

Accordingly, the Daityas hurled upon Prahlada, whilst he was in the ocean, heavy rocks and piled them in heaps over him. But he, with his mind still undisturbed, offered praise to the God of gods. From the bottom of the sea rose the incessant prayer of the devotee on the wings of spirit.

‘Glory to Thee, O Supreme Spirit, who, as *Brahma* dost create the world, as *Vishnu* dost preserve it and as *Rudra* dost destroy it. Thou art the God of gods and of all orders of beings in this universe. Glory to Thee again and again, from whom all things proceed and to whom all things return. Thou art all, for all things are only forms of Thee. Thou art everywhere, here at the bottom of the sea as in the sky above. Thou art in me and I am in Thee. I am with Thee everywhere, I too am all things,

and all things are in me I am everlasting, imperishable and unchangeable, for I am one with Thee'

Thus meditating upon the Supreme Spirit, Prahlada entirely forgot himself, overcame all mental limitations and became one with the object of his meditations. At once the bonds by which he was bound burst asunder, the piles of rocks which lay heavy on him gave way and he came out of the main. When he beheld the outer world again he remembered who he was and once more chanted the praise of the Lord

'Glory to Thee, O God, who art both perceptible and imperceptible, divisible and indivisible, definable and indefinable, mutable and immutable. Thou art both the one and the many. Glory unto Thee, the First Cause of all

Prahlada's trials were now over. The God of gods whom he had worshipped with such devotion through all his sufferings now appeared before him and said 'I am pleased, O Prahlada, with the faithful devotion you have shown to me. Demand from me whatever boon you desire

Prahlada replied 'In all the thousand births through which I may be doomed to pass, may my faith in Thee, O Lord, never know any decay! May I have the same passionate desire for Thee as I have now! The Lord then observed 'I know you have, O Prahlada, a passionate devotion to me and you shall ever have it. Now choose another boon

'Do thou, O Lord' said Prahlada, 'then pardon my father for the sin he has committed in punishing me for praising Thee. I have been stabbed with weapons of steel. I have been thrown into flames, I have been bitten by venomous snakes and trampled upon by elephants. I have been given poisoned food, I have been hurled from the top of the palace, I have been bound and cast into the sea and heavy rocks have been heaped upon me. And

all this has been done to me because I put my faith in Thee, and all this has been endured by me unharmed through Thy mercy. Do Thou now extend this mercy to my father, and free him from his ignorance and sin.'

To this the Lord replied: 'It shall be as you desire, O Prahlada. But I will grant you another boon. Choose what you want.'

'All my desires, O Lord,' said Prahlada, 'have been fulfilled by the boon that Thou hast already granted, that my faith in Thee shall never suffer decay. I require no other boon.'

The Lord was pleased with Prahlada's words and said: 'Since your heart is filled with such unshakable trust in me, you shall, when your earthly course is run, come unto me and live in me for ever.'

So saying the God of gods vanished from His devotee's sight. Prahlada went back to his father and bowed before his feet. Hiranyakasipu rose from his seat, embraced his son and kissed him on the forehead and, shedding tears, said: 'Are you alive, my boy?'

There was a great change in the heart of the King of the Daityas. He repented of his former cruelty and treated his son with kindness ever afterwards.

This is how the Vishnu Purana ends this famous story. But the Bhagavata Purana relates that Hiranyakasipu never relented and that, when his son said that God was everywhere, he fiercely demanded whether He was in the pillar of his hall, and that, when Prahlada said He was, he struck it with his fist and that God came out of it in the form of a man with a lion's head and tore the tyrant to pieces.

The reader may choose for himself the ending he likes best.

CHAPTER IX

FOUR FAMOUS LEGENDS (*Continued*)

III

The Legend of Harischandra

There lived ages ago a most virtuous king named Harischandra who ruled over Kosala. The well known adage 'As is the king so are the subjects' was literally true of Kosala. For his subjects were as virtuous as he was himself. They took no delight in anything evil. Drink and gambling were unknown to them. They were not puffed up with their wealth nor were they ever untruthful or unjust in their dealings. Consequently there was no famine or sickness or untimely death in the land. There men grew up strong and healthy and women beautiful and refined and all of them looked upon their king and queen as their father and mother.

But the very virtues of the king brought trouble to him and his subjects. For a dispute arose between the two great Rishis Vasishta and Visvamitra about the possibility of finding a man of incorruptible virtue in this world. Visvamitra maintained that there was no such man on earth. He believed that even the most virtuous man would fail when put to a severe test. But Vasishta said that while this was true of the generality of men there were exceptional men in the world who would never yield to any temptation however strong. Such men would rather undergo tortures than give up their virtue. And he mentioned Harischandra the king of Kosala as an example. Now as Vasishta was the family priest of the king Visvamitra had a churlish laugh at his expense and remarked that his friend held too high an opinion of

his royal patron. And when Vasishta quietly denied that he was in any way partial in his judgment, Visvamitra hotly defended his own position and undertook to put Harischandra to a severe test and make him swerve from the path of virtue. Vasishta agreed to the experiment, and the two sages, invoking the gods as witnesses to their contest, parted company.

Visvamitra went to Ayodhya, the capital of Harischandra, and, learning that the king was going on a hunting expedition, reached the forest before him and pretended to be engaged in severe tapas in a wayside ashram. When the hunting party passed by him he created an illusion of some female voices which cried: 'O save us, save us from this man.' The king at once responded to these appeals and called out: 'Fear not, I am coming. Who is that wretch, who under my rule is so wicked as to molest women? Pierced by my arrows he will fall and enter upon the sleep that knows not breaking.' Saying these words Harischandra ran in the direction of the voices followed by his men and was terrified to find no women there, but only the great sage Visvamitra, whose tapas had been disturbed rudely by the rushing in of the hunting party. The king prostrated himself before the sage, apologized to him and said that he would give anything in reparation to him, his kingdom and indeed all the wealth he had.

'Are not these mere idle words?' demanded Visvamitra angrily.

'I speak no idle words, O sage,' replied the king. 'Nor do I ever go back on my word.'

'I take you at your word then,' rejoined the sage. 'But you already owe me a great sum which you gave me as my fee at the Rajasuya sacrifice and which I asked you to keep in trust for me.'

'I will pay it to you, sir,' said Harischandra, 'when ever you demand it.'

'Well, then,' said Visvamitra, 'let me see how you will redeem your first promise. Go back to your capital and make arrangements to hand over "your kingdom and all the wealth you have" Are not those your very words?'

'Yes, sir,' said the king calmly and took leave of the sage.

Visvamitra went the very next day to the king's capital and relentlessly took over the kingdom and all the wealth in the palace. Harischandra, without a word, gave away all he had including the personal ornaments of his queen and asked the sage what more he wanted.

'Who is now the king of Kosala?' asked Visvamitra.

'Of course, you are now the king,' replied Harischandra.

'Then my royal command is that you should immediately leave my kingdom with your wife and son, taking nothing with you except the clothes you are wearing,' said the sage.

'Your commands will be obeyed,' replied Harischandra and at once started from his capital with his wife Chandramati and their boy Rohita.

As he was going Visvamitra stood in his way and said 'But before you go, O Harischandra, please pay me the amount you owe me—I mean, the fee of the Rajasuya sacrifice entrusted to you.'

'You see sir, replied Harischandra, 'how I have just now stripped myself of all the wealth I had. I have nothing now which I can call my own, except the clothing which you have permitted me to keep. Please give me some time and I will discharge the debt I owe you.'

'What time do you require?' demanded Visvamitra.

'In a month, sir, I will try to pay back the sum. At present, you see I have no means.'

'I agree,' said the sage. 'A month hence I will come to you. See that you don't fail to pay me then.'

'I will not fail, sir,' said Harischandra and took leave of his creditor.

When the subjects of Harischandra came to know of what had happened—how their truthful monarch had unjustly been taken at his word and stripped of all his possessions,—they rushed into the street crying, 'Alas, O master, what have you done! How is a word which you casually uttered binding on you? Alas, sir, your virtue has ruined us all. How can you leave us thus, your children? We cannot stay here when you leave. Permit us to go with you. We will all come with our wives and children.'

Harischandra had to pause now and speak to his subjects at length. He told them that he should bear the results of his rashness alone and not allow his subjects to share them with him. While it was his duty now to leave the kingdom quietly, it was their duty to remain and serve their king loyally. Their new king was a royal sage possessing marvellous powers and famous throughout the world. He was in every way entitled to their respect. If he now appeared a little hard of heart and a little too exacting, he was probably acting only as an instrument in the hands of divine Providence whose purposes were inscrutable. Any way it was their duty never to swerve from the path of righteousness, whatever might happen.

As he was thus addressing his people in the street, Visvamitra sent word by his agents that Harischandra should not stay in his kingdom a moment longer. *The king was rudely reminded that he had promised to leave*

at once but was breaking his promise by lingering in the street and addressing the people. Harischandra at once stopped speaking and left the capital with his wife and son.

Neither Harischandra nor his wife Chandramati was accustomed to travel on foot. But they were forced to do so in the days of adversity that followed. They were forced to beg for their food at the Dharmasalas on the way or do manual work to maintain themselves and their boy. *It was their intention to go to the holy city of Kasi and wash away their sins in the sacred waters of the Ganga.* They were convinced that their unexpected sufferings were due to their own sins in a former life and so they never harboured any ill feeling against Visvamitra. They thought he was only an instrument in the hands of the stern God of Justice.

After many days of weary wanderings they reached at last their destination. But the very first man whom they met on entering the gates of the holy city of Benares on a certain morning was Visvamitra himself. The latter reminded Harischandra that the period of one month which he had allowed for the repayment of his debt would be over that day and that he had come to collect the amount from him. Harischandra during his wanderings had forgotten all about the debt. He now counted the days and found that Visvamitra spoke the truth. He was dismayed, but taking courage in an instant said that he had still half a day before him and would try to pay him in the evening. Visvamitra replied he would not at all trouble him for the money, if only he said that he could not or would not pay him or that he did not owe him anything. Thereupon Harischandra said with some heat that it was a fact that he owed him the fee of the Raja-suya sacrifice and added that he would try to pay him the amount before the expiry of the day.

When the sage departed Harischandra began to think of the ways and means by which he could raise the required sum. Nobody knew him in the city of Benares, and the time before him was short. He shuddered to think of what would happen to him if he should become a promise-breaker. His wife sympathized with him in his distress and wept to see him in such a depressed state of mind. Meanwhile a thought came into the mind of Harischandra, but he at once recoiled from it. What if he should sell himself as a slave to some rich merchant and discharge the debt? He gave a hint of this to his wife. She caught it at once and exclaimed: 'Alas! What will happen to me and our son Rohita if you part from us? How can I maintain myself and the boy? Far better is it that you sell us two and remain free. After you have earned some money, you can buy us back.'

The husband and wife wept long over this prospect. But as the evening was approaching, they had to make up their minds. Harischandra saw the reasonableness of his wife's argument and determined to sell her and the boy as slaves. He took them to the market place of the city and loudly announced in a voice choked with tears that his wife and son were for sale. An old Brahmin soon came up and said that he had a young wife who wanted the services of a servant-maid and proposed to buy the woman offered for sale, but he had no use for the boy. Thereupon Chandramati begged him in piteous tones to buy her son also and promised to teach the boy to do menial work and make himself useful in the master's household. The old man grumbled a little, paid a small additional sum and led away the two slaves to his house. Scarcely had they turned the corner of the street when Visvamitra appeared again before Harischandra and asked him whether he had got the money. The latter with

streaming eyes paid his creditor the whole amount which he had received from the old Brahmin

'But this is not even half of what you owe me,' exclaimed the infuriated sage

'True sir But I will try to give you the balance in a short time,' pleaded Harischandra

'In a short time!' burst out Visvamitra, 'the day is coming to a close and yet you have not redeemed your promise I see you are a vile promise breaker Tell me you owe me nothing or you will not pay me anything more and I will not trouble you again'

'I deserve your reproof, sir,' mildly pleaded Harischandra 'But I have never said that I did not owe you money, nor that I would not discharge my debt I have just sold my wife and son and have partly discharged the debt Please come again an hour later, just at sunset I will try to sell myself and pay the balance'

'How many times have I to come for this precious sum!' growled the angry creditor and went away

Harischandra accompanied him part of the way trying to pacify him and then returned to the market and standing in a prominent place cried aloud in the hearing of all 'Whoever desires me for a slave bought with money, let him speak quickly, while the sun is still shining in the west'

But nobody would pay the price he wanted Buyer after buyer came up to him and refused even to look at him when the amount was mentioned At last when the sun was about to set, there stepped up to him from the throng a hideous executioner, the Head Keeper of the city cemetery In the words of the old book, he was 'an outcast foul smelling, disfigured uncouth, bearded, with projecting teeth, cruel dark in complexion, his belly pendulous his eyes tawny and haggard, his enunciation

barbarous. He carried a batch of birds, he had a skull in his hand, he was adorned with garlands taken from corpses. His face was long and repulsive. He talked much and often, he was surrounded by a pack of dogs. He carried a long staff. He was hideous and dreadful.'

He stepped up and offered to pay the price. 'But who are you?' asked Harischandra recoiling from him.

'I am Pravira,' the man replied, 'famed as an expert executioner in this city. I also guard the great cemetery at the south-eastern end. I despatch those who are condemned to death and gather the clothes of the dead who are brought to my cemetery.'

'I would rather be consumed by the fire of Visvamitra's wrath than become a slave to you,' thought Harischandra and declined to consider the bargain.

The executioner demanded why *his offer was not* accepted when he was ready to pay the amount publicly announced. At this moment Visvamitra himself arrived again and, learning that the man had offered to pay the exact amount required to discharge the balance of his debt, asked Harischandra the same question. Harischandra then fell at the feet of the sage and begged him to save him from being a slave to a cemetery-keeper.

'Make me your slave, O holy sage,' he cried, 'for the balance of the debt I owe you, I will be obedient to your will and do whatever work you give me. I come of the solar race of kings. O save me from the disgrace of becoming a slave to a cemetery-keeper.'

'Then you are willing to become my slave?' demanded the creditor

'Yes, sir That is my earnest prayer now Do agree to take me as your slave,' replied the debtor

'I agree,' said Visvamitra 'Now that you are my slave, I discharge you from the debt But I sell you this moment to this man here for the sum he has offered'

The executioner was glad to have the slave he had bargained for He readily paid the money to Visvamitra and led away Harischandra to his house near the cemetery at the southern end of the city

From that time for many a weary day Harischandra's duty was to collect for his master the cemetery fees from those who came to bury or burn their dead and gather the discarded clothes of the corpses On the very first day of his entering on his new duties his master gave him the following instructions

'Stay on this burial ground night and day and always be on the look out for the arrival of corpses Collect the fee strictly from every one, and divide it into six equal parts One part is to be paid to the king, three parts to me and two parts will be your wages Also, your duty will be to execute the criminals condemned to death, whenever I cannot do the work myself'

Harischandra spent a full twelvemonth in this degrading occupation But he served his master loyally Day and night he could be seen running about the cemetery with a long staff in his hand, here collecting burial fees, there piling up clothes stripped from corpses and in a third place driving away the jackals and wolves that came in packs to rifle the graves in the dark He was now thoroughly altered in appearance His hair had become matted, he had a grisly beard, he had become emaciated and dark in complexion, and his bones protruded

in several parts of his body. Sometimes as he rested beside a *burning corpse through the long hours of the night*, he would doze a little, and then all the suppressed feelings of his heart would rush up into his dreams and make him weep and wail for a long time unconsciously, till with a sudden start he would wake up and hear the crackling of the burning faggots on the pyre beside him and the howling of jackals in the dark far away. Sometimes when a young woman or a small boy was borne on the bier and brought to the burial ground, he would be reminded of his wife and son and, forgetting his profession for a moment, would join in the lamentations of the mourners who accompanied the dead. And sometimes when his sorrow became unbearable, he would ask himself whether, after all, he was right in having submitted to the cruel demands of his creditor and selling his wife and son and himself into slavery. But he would at once brush his doubts aside and assure himself that he would have suffered worse in mind, if he had been untruthful or faithless. He had often heard his preceptor Vasishta say that Dharma was the only light that mortals had on earth and that all else—pain as well as pleasure—was the mere illusion of Ajnana. He must therefore walk by that light wherever it led him. He must do his duty by that light whether he was the king of Kosala or the keeper of the Benares cemetery. It was not for him to choose.

A year after he had entered on his duties as the slave of Pravira, Harischandra saw one night a ragged and destitute woman bringing to the burning ground in her own arms the dead body of her son, a small boy, who, she said amidst her wailing, had died of snake bite. She had also brought with her a faggot of sticks for the funeral pyre. Harischandra demanded of her the usual fee for

cremation. She said that she was a destitute slave and could not pay anything. Harischandra thereupon sternly declared that he could not allow the cremation. The poor woman wailed piteously and begged him to exempt her from the payment. He then explained to her how one sixth of the fee had to be paid into the king's treasury, one half had to go to his master and one third to himself as his wages. He could exempt his own share, but the remaining two thirds had to be paid before cremation could take place. The woman still pleaded poverty and said she had nothing to give. Harischandra then gently said that he saw a gleaming little jewel of gold hanging from her neck amidst her rags and suggested it might be sold and the fee paid. On hearing these words the woman burst into a wild fit of lamentation crying, 'O gods, what heinous sins have I committed that the sacred symbol of my marriage, which till now was visible only to my husband, is now seen by this cemetery guard?'

Harischandra was now startled. He peered through the darkness into the mourner's face and asked her who her husband was. *She replied sobbing that her husband was once a king, but having fallen on evil days and unable to pay a debt he owed to a cruel creditor had to sell her and her child in the market place of Benares.* She could proceed no further with her story, for Harischandra now uttered a loud cry and fell on the dead body on her lap uttering incoherent words.

'O Rohita Rohita darling! Is it you, my boy? Come to me my child! Father is here. O, where was that snake?—What were you doing? O gods, I can't bear this any longer.'

It was indeed Chandramati, Harischandra's wife, who had brought her dead son to the burning ground on that dismal night. On recognizing each other, the

husband and wife wept long beating their breasts and tearing their hair and most piteously caressing the lifeless body of their son lying on their laps. They resolved not to outlive their darling child. They wanted to fall on his pyre and put an end to their wretched lives. But there was still the difficulty of the boy's cremation. Harischandra still insisted on the payment of the fee due to his master. He began to urge his wife to go back to the old Brahmin, her master, and beg of him the money required for the cremation of the boy. But Chandramati, unable to leave the dead body, rolled on the ground in her misery. It was a heart-rending scene. Harischandra, however, still insisted that his wife should go back to the city and bring the money required for the boy's cremation. So she rose and weeping left the place.

Unable to find the way, she was groping through the darkness on the main road, when a man with a small bundle in his hand accosted her saying: 'Who are you? And why are you weeping and groping your way through the darkness at this hour of the night?' The poor woman related her story briefly and asked the man to show her the way to her master's house. The stranger affected great sympathy for her in her distress and said: 'You need not go all the way to your master's house now. Take this bundle. It contains some jewels. You might use them for paying the cremation fee.' With these words he thrust the bundle into her hands and, while she was remonstrating, the sounds of horses' hoofs were heard from a distance. At once the stranger ran away into one of the lanes near by and disappeared in the darkness. The frightened woman was left alone.

The sounds came nearer and nearer and with them also came the penetrating beams of light from lanterns held up by two men on horseback. These were the police

of the city who came pursuing the thief, who at dead of night had entered a house and strangled a sleeping child and stolen the jewels on its body. They stopped on seeing the woman and caught her red handed, as they believed, for she had the bundle of jewels in her hand and threw it down and tried to run away when they approached her. No explanations or appeals or lamentations on her part were of any avail now. Her extreme poverty and ragged dress were only additional proofs that she was the criminal.

Therefore she was at once taken to the magistrate's house and a complaint lodged against her. On hearing the allegation made and seeing the child's jewels in the bundle, the magistrate exclaimed, 'Monster, have you no children?' The ill-fated Chandramati pleaded innocence and once more narrated how the bundle of jewels had come into her possession. But the magistrate refused to believe her story and said, 'Murder and theft are enough to take you to the torments of hell. You need not add lies to them.'

Accordingly before sunrise the next morning she was condemned to death and at once led away by the guards to the chief executioner of the city living on the outskirts of the cemetery. Thus while Harischandra was still sitting near the dead body of his son, awaiting the arrival of his wife with the cremation fee, he saw her being led in chains to the block where criminals were executed. He could scarcely believe his eyes. He rose from the ground and ran towards the place of execution. But he was interrupted on the way by a boy who brought word from his master Pravara that he should at once fetch the axe and execute the criminal that was being led to the block. Thus were horrors heaped on horrors head for Harischandra. He sank down speechless for a moment.

But the execution could not be stayed. The orders of the magistrate were peremptory and the instructions of his own master were clear. So he rose and brought the axe and went to the place of execution. He stood as one dazed, while the guards who accompanied the criminal gave out the details of her crime and read out the orders of the magistrate. *It was not for him to question the judgment that had been passed nor to produce counter-evidence to prove that the victim before him was innocent.* He was only the bondsman of the executioner whose instructions he was bound to carry out. Meanwhile his wife looked at him with a cold stony stare. She was past the stage of tears. A cruel destiny had driven these two innocent souls into a situation of horror for which there were no words. As it were by mutual consent, they refused to recognize each other, they refrained from saying a word in the presence of the guards. They were content to go through the final stage of the tragedy of their lives as quickly as possible and meet on the other side of death.

After the formalities connected with the order of execution were over, Harischandra was asked by the guards to do his duty. He took the axe in both his hands, closed his eyes for a moment in the speechless agony of a prayer, and lifting it above his head was bringing it down with a mighty force on the neck of his wife—when his hands were seized from behind by Visvamitra who appeared now on the scene accompanied by the high gods of heaven who had been watching the ordeals of the king with great interest.

The sage had acknowledged his defeat to Vasishtha earlier and now presented himself before Harischandra saying, 'Well done, O king of Kosala! Your son is alive, not dead. And you and your wife have merited a place in the highest heaven by your unwavering adherence to

virtue in the most trying circumstances All your troubles are only an illusion created by me '

Then Indra the king of the gods explained to Harischandra how Visvamitra was permitted to put his virtue to the severest test and how glad they all were that he had stood it so well He welcomed him and his wife to heaven and asked him to go to his capital first and install his son on the throne with due pomp and ceremony The old books say that, when Harischandra was thus asked by Indra to accompany him to heaven along with his wife, he insisted on all the virtuous citizens of his capital going with him and that his wishes were fulfilled after the installation of Prince Rohita on the throne of Kosala

IV

The Legend of Savitri and Satyavan

Once upon a time there was a king Asvapati by name, in the country of the Madras He was very popular with his subjects and enjoyed all the blessings of a happy life, except one He had no children He was advancing in years and there was no heir to his kingdom So he began to observe severe vows and faithfully offered every day ten thousand oblations in the sacred fire repeating the Gayatri And this he did for eighteen years The presiding deity of the mantra—the goddess Savitri—was pleased with his devotions and appearing before him asked him what he wanted

'If thou art pleased with me, O goddess' said the king 'may I be blessed with many sons worthy of my race'

'No' said the goddess in reply to his prayer 'There shall be born unto thee now only a daughter But she shall be worthy of thy race and be equal to many sons It is not fit for thee to question the wisdom of the gods'

So saying the goddess disappeared and the king reconciled himself to the idea of having only a daughter and no sons. Before the end of the year the queen conceived and gave birth to a female child. The king gave the child the name of the goddess, namely, Savitri. And, as she was his only child, he was very fond of her and gave her full liberty to do everything as she liked. Savitri grew up into a very beautiful girl and was the darling not only of her parents, but also of the whole kingdom.

The young princess became an expert in all the games in which generally only boys could distinguish themselves. She was admired for her intelligence, courage and decision of character. The king remembered what the goddess had said, namely, that his daughter would be equal to many sons, and so he was very proud of her and gave her full freedom to shape her own career. When the time came for selecting a proper match for her, he thought it best to leave the choice to herself. He asked her to take with her some of his sage counsellors and go with them to the courts of various kings and select a prince who would be worthy of her.

Accordingly Savitri travelled with a suitable escort and visited the capitals of many kings and also many forest abodes where royal sages lived with their families in retirement. Her choice fell at last on Prince Satyavan who was living in a forest hermitage with his father—the blind king Dyumatsena of the Salwas, who had been driven by his enemies from his throne. She made up her mind to marry him and came back to her father's court.

When she returned from her tour and went to meet her father, she found him in the company of the famous sage Narada. As soon as the sage saw the princess who was in the bloom of her youth, he asked the king when he was going to celebrate her marriage. The king laughed

and replied that his daughter had gone on a tour for that very purpose through various countries and asked her whether she had selected her bridegroom. The princess boldly replied that she had, and gave him all the details of her tour. Now Narada with his supernatural powers looked into the future and exclaimed 'Alas, O king thy daughter has committed a great mistake, since, not knowing all about Satyavan the son of Dyumatsena she has chosen him.'

'Why, what is wrong with him?' asked the king. 'Is he not a prince possessing good qualities?'

'Satyavan is a prince of excellent qualities' replied Narada. 'In energy he is like the sun, in wisdom like Brihaspati in courage like Indra and in forgiveness like the mother Earth. He is truthful generous modest and patient. He is devoted to his parents and teachers liberal in his gifts and correct in every detail of conduct. He is also very handsome in appearance and is an expert rider.'

'These are all indeed excellent qualities' exclaimed the king. 'What then are his defects O sage, if he has any?'

'He has only one defect O king' said Narada. 'But that overshadows all his good qualities. You know that I can look into the future. I see that exactly a year from this day Satyavan is destined to die.'

Every one was stunned when the sage uttered these words. After a brief pause the king turned to his daughter and said 'Come O Savitri this is no good. Go and choose another.'

Savitri bent down her head and was plunged in deep thought. Nobody dared disturb her. After a few minutes she looked up and said 'Father I have once for all selected the prince. I have given him my heart. Whether he is short lived or long lived, whether he possesses the

qualities mentioned by the sage or is devoid of them, he shall be my lord. From this there can be no going back.'

Narada admired the decision of the young princess and counselled the king to trust to the mercy of the gods and approve of the match, in spite of the revelation he had made to him.

'Blessed be all of you. May this marriage bring you peace and happiness!' said the sage in conclusion and departed.

The king knew that nothing could change the mind of his daughter. So he lost no time in making the necessary preparations for the marriage. And on the appointed day he set out with Savitri and a band of courtiers and priests for the hermitage of Dyumatsena in the forest. After reaching the place he asked the exiled king in proper *form to accept his daughter as the bride of Satyavan.* Dyumatsena replied with tears in his eyes: 'Deprived of my kingdom and bereft of my eyesight, O Asvapati, I am leading, as you see, this hard life in the forest with my wife and son as my only companions. How can your daughter bred in the luxuries of your palace endure the forest life along with us? We are fallen on evil days, Asvapati, and are not fit for an alliance with you.' But Asvapati said: 'My daughter knows as well as I, O Dyumatsena, that prosperity and adversity come and go. They are transitory things. But honour, virtue, love and friendship—these are not transitory. Their results abide for ever. We have come to you seeking these and not prosperity or pleasure. We have come to you seeking love and friendship. You are in every way fit for an alliance with me, and I hope I am fit for an alliance with you. It is not proper, therefore, that you should disappoint me. Please accept my daughter Savitri as your

daughter in law and let the marriage be celebrated here'

'So be it, then,' said Dyumatsena 'In fact, I may tell you, O king, that I had thought of this alliance before I lost my kingdom But after I became an exile in the forest, I had to put it away from my thoughts'

Dyumatsena thus gave his consent and the marriage took place that very day in the hermitage The ceremony was simple as befitted the forest life of Satyavan and his father The bride was given away by Asvapati with the customary gifts of robes and jewels The priest who had come with the king officiated and made the bride and the bridegroom go round the sacred fire hand in hand The prescribed seven steps were taken, and Savitri became the wife of Satyavan

The king departed the next day with all his retinue After he had left, Savitri put away all her ornaments and dressed herself in bark garments like her husband She lived an austere life and with her modesty, self denial and love of service she pleased her husband's parents and all the sages who lived in that forest settlement She passionately loved her husband and he loved her as passionately in return But they never showed their feelings outwardly Their hearts alone knew the depth of their love And they were very happy, though the warning given by Narada was present day and night in the mind of Savitri That was the only secret which the young wife did not share with her husband

Days passed The seasons changed The marriage had taken place early in spring Then came summer with its sweltering heat and that was followed by torrential rains which flooded the forest streams Autumn was a lovely season for the forest dwellers, as the skies were clear and the moon shone bright at night and they

had plenty of fruit on trees and bushes. Then came the season of mists and cold when they had to retire early and shiver through long dark nights listening to the cries of the wild animals in the forest. When winter was again giving place to spring, Savitri, from whose mind the words of Narada were never absent, knew that the day of Satyavan's death was approaching. Nobody else knew anything about it. Having carefully counted the days and ascertained that her husband was destined to die on the fourth day following she undertook to observe the Triratna vow, fasting day and night for three full days. Hearing of her vow, her father-in-law was a little alarmed and asked her how she could go through such an ordeal successfully.

'Don't you know, O father,' she replied, 'that perseverance is the cause of success in the observance of vows — perseverance and absolute faith in the Devata that one worships?'

'What a strange request' exclaimed Satyavan 'You have never gone into the woods before. The forest paths are hard to traverse even for men. And you have been fasting for the last three days, I know not why. You wouldn't be able to walk even a few steps today.'

'No. I feel no weakness,' replied Savitri. 'I cannot bear separation from you today even for a moment. I must go with you. I pray you, do not prevent me and make me miserable.'

'If you are so particular, O Savitri,' said Satyavan 'you may please yourself. I will not raise any objection. But please get the permission of my father and mother here.'

Savitri then looked at her father-in-law and mother-in-law and pleaded that, after fasting for three days, she felt a call to accompany her husband into the forest and gather fuel with him for the sacrificial fire. She had never come to them before with any request during the last ten months that she had lived with them, and they should not refuse her first request. They heard her and tried to dissuade her, but finding that she was very eager to accompany her husband to the forest that day they yielded and gave her permission. Only they instructed Satyavan not to take her very far and to return home earlier than usual.

Savitri now joined her husband and they both set out with axe and wallet in their hands. Though her heart was racked with fear at what might happen, she put on a smile and appeared to be pleased when the innocent Satyavan drew her attention in the forest to the rows of flowering champak trees, to the blue peacocks dancing in the sun or to the forest streams running with clear water. The prince was in one of his happiest moods as his beloved wife was accompanying him for the first time into the forest to see him gather fuel and flowers and fruit. Hand

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On the third night Savitri observed a continuous vigil in addition to the fast. Without food or sleep she lay at the feet of the Mother Goddess, praying with rapt devotion for the life of her husband. When the sun rose, she finished her rites and said before leaving the shrine: 'Today is the day, O mother. I beseech thy help.' She then went round and bowed at the feet of all the sages in the hermitage and received their blessings. When she went to her father-in-law and mother-in-law they said to her: 'Now that the three days and nights are over, child, break your fast early today.'

'Yes,' she said, 'but I can do so only after sunset, if all goes well. That is my vow.'

As Savitri was speaking thus, Satyavan, taking his axe upon his shoulder, came there with the intention of setting out for the woods. When she saw him she requested his permission to accompany him to the forest.

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in hand they went through narrow woodland paths, crushing dried leaves under their feet. The prince would often bend down to release Savitri's robe when it was caught in a prickly bush or to scrape away the clay from her feet after they walked over soft moist ground. With characteristic self-control the princess never betrayed the sorrow of her heart, but appeared to respond to his mood gaily. Satyavan cracked many jokes with her. He said he was astonished at her strength in walking with him such a distance after a fast of three days and asked her whether she had been eating in secret. He repeatedly tried to coax her to tell him what the object of her vow was. Had she committed any sin in secret? Or did she merely want to get fame for sanctity among the inmates of the hermitage?

'What have young women to do with religious vows?' he asked. 'Look at these berries. They will get ripe only in their season—not now when they are still half flower.'

He rattled off in this way, gay and light of heart, and at last, having reached the heart of the forest, he began to work. He picked fruits and plucked flowers from various trees and bushes and filled his wallet. Then he bent down at the foot of a dried tree and began to hew it down with his axe. After a few strokes he felt a strange weakness coming over his limbs. His head began to swim. So he stopped his work and approaching his wife; said that he was not feeling quite well and would rest for a while.

Savitri at once sat on the ground and asked him to rest his head on her lap. He did so and closed his eyes. The poor princess knew that the hour of her trial had come. She bent down her eyes on her husband and found a lividness spreading over his face. She touched his hands and found them becoming cold. The next moment she

saw a shadowy figure standing at the feet of her lord. He was of dark hue and was clad in red. He wore a diadem on his head and carried a noose in his hand. It was Yama, the god of death. On seeing him, Savitri gently placed her husband's head on the ground and rose with a trembling heart and said, 'From your form, sire, I see thou art a god. O tell me what thou intendest to do here.'

'Know me, O Savitri, as Yama, the god of death,' he replied. 'As you are pure of heart and are so devoted to your husband, you are able to see my form which is generally invisible to mortal eyes. Your husband's allotted days are over, and it is my duty now to bind his soul with this noose and carry him away.'

Saying these words, the god of death cast his noose on the prostrate form of Satyavan and dragged out his soul. Immediately the prince's body, deprived of breath and shorn of lustre and devoid of all movement, became a cold corpse. Yama then began to go in a southerly direction carrying the prince's soul bound in his noose. Savitri followed close behind him. The god therefore turned round and said, 'Follow me not, O Princess. But go back and perform the obsequies of your husband. You are now freed from all other obligations to him. You have to lead a different kind of life hereafter.'

But Savitri replied, 'Not so, O god of death. Whither my husband goes I will also go. Husband and wife are one in life and one in death. That is the eternal Dharma. Our love is still unfulfilled. I pray thee, O god, bind my soul in the same noose and carry me along with my lord. Thou wantest me to go back and lead some other kind of life away from my husband. It is not possible for me to do so. Thou knowest full well, O Yama, that the goal of man's life here below is to become as god like as possible

If that goal could be reached by us in the sanctities of domestic life, why dost thou force us to lead our lives apart and lose our way? My lord and I have found in our *mutual love something divine which would take us to the goal of life*. Why dost thou part us now and defeat the very end for which we have been created?

Yama was pleased with the argument of the princess and said: 'Well have you argued, O Savitri. I am pleased with the keenness of your intellect as well as the purity of your heart. Except the life of your husband, you may ask for any boon you want. I will grant it.'

'Grant then, O god of death,' cried Savitri with great presence of mind and practical wisdom, 'that my husband's father, the old king, gets back his eye-sight.'

'I grant that boon,' replied Yama. 'It will be even as you have desired. Dyumatsena will have his sight restored this moment. Now, you may go back, O Princess. You have already come too far. You must be fatigued.'

'Not so, O Yama,' replied Savitri. 'What fatigue can I feel in the presence of my husband? Wherever thou carriest my lord, thither will I also go. O righteous god of death, listen to me again.'

After granting these, Yama said again that except the life of her husband, she might ask for a fifth boon. Savitri now smiled and said she required no more boons and pointed out that the god had already granted the life of her husband by the fourth boon. For how could she have a hundred sons without her husband being restored to life? Yama laughed when he saw that he had been outwitted by the clever girl and said he would confirm the fourth boon by a fifth. He granted both husband and wife four hundred years of happy life on earth. Having said these gracious words he released the soul of Satyavan from his noose and disappeared.

Savitri now ran back to the spot where the body of her husband lay. She sat down and took his head on her lap as before. In a moment Satyavan recovered his consciousness. Opening his eyes, he exclaimed 'Alas! how long have I slept! It is late in the night. Why did you not wake me up, my dear? I remember I had a pain in my head and laid myself down to take rest. I had a very troubled sleep. I dreamt that a man of dark hue, with a crown on his head, came and bound me hand and foot and was carrying me away and that you ran after him and quarrelled with him. Then he placed me down and went away. It is strange that I heard clearly both of you talking, but could not understand a word of it. Is it all a dream or did any man come here while I slept?

'No man came here,' replied Savitri. 'But come, let us go. It is nearing midnight. Now don't you hear the cries of wild animals? You are all right now, I hope.'

'I am all right. But I am feeling a little weak,' said Satyavan. 'How can we find our way in this darkness? It seems impossible.'

'Let us make a fire,' suggested Savitri, 'to keep wild animals away and let us spend the night here. Early in the morning we can retrace our way home.'

'No, no,' said Satyavan, 'My father and mother will be very anxious. Never before have I stayed away in the forest after night-fall. I am sure they are already searching for us and weeping and wailing. Surely you were wrong in not waking me up.'

'Let us go then,' said Savitri, ignoring his accusation. 'As you say you are still feeling weak, let us leave this wallet full of fruits here. I will tie it up on the branch of a tree. We can come back here tomorrow and take it away. I will now carry your axe for you and come behind. I don't know these forest paths. You know them, so you go in front and find out the way.'

'Yes,' said Satyavan looking at the eastern sky. 'The moon is rising and in a few minutes there will be sufficient light. We need not fear that we shall miss our way. You see there, where I am pointing with my hand, a knot of palasa trees. There the path diverges into two. We have to take the path that goes north from those trees. Come, there is no fear.'

Meanwhile at the hermitage Dyumatsena, having suddenly regained his eye-sight, could see everything clearly. But his joy soon gave place to fear and anxiety when the night fell and his son and daughter-in-law had not returned home. As the forest all around was infested with wild animals no one in the hermitage would go abroad at night. But as the old man and his wife were weeping for their son, a number of the inmates of the hermitages took pity on them and went out to search for Savitri and Satyavan. They rushed hither and thither in the dark unfrequented places of the forest. Their hands and feet were pierced with thorns and their bodies lacerated with

the sharp blades of kusa grass. At last after midnight when the moon rose they discovered the main path. Going a considerable distance along that way, they heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Then they hallooed and waited. They heard the answering halloo of Satyavan. At once they recognized his voice and called him aloud by name. He answered, and within a few minutes they met.

When they reached home Dyumatsena and his wife, with tears in their eyes embraced their son in their arms and asked him a thousand questions. Satyavan related to his parents all that had happened during the day and explained how, on account of his sudden sickness, he had to lie down and sleep for many hours.

'Then you do not know the cause of your father's regaining his eye sight?' asked Gautama, the oldest sage of the company. 'I am sure Savitri will be able to tell us,' said he turning to her. 'She knows more things than many of us here. If it is not a secret to be kept by you, tell us. O princess, frankly all that happened in the forest today.'

I have no secrets to keep today, O revered Gautama, said Savitri. 'You know them all. O holy sage, and yet you want a confession from me. I am now prepared to narrate the whole story.'

Then she narrated to that company in detail, how Narada had foretold the death of the prince even before her marriage, how she observed the Triratna vow for the sake of preserving her husband's life, how she knew the day on which he would meet his death and hence accompanied him to the woods, how she met Yama the god of death and pleaded with him and how he granted her five boons.

The inmates of the hermitage who heard the story were astonished at the single minded devotion of Savitri.

They praised and blessed her and retired for the night. Next morning before they woke up from their sleep there came a company of riders to Dyumatsena from the country of the Salwas over which he had reigned as king. They came with the report that the usurper who had driven him from the throne had been slain by the people and that the king's subjects were ready to welcome him back to his kingdom. When these emissaries saw that their old king had recovered his eye-sight and that he could see them, their joy knew no bounds.

Dyumatsena then took leave of all the sages in the hermitage and accompanied by his son Satyavan started for his capital. The men rode on horseback and went in advance, while the queen and the princess followed in palanquins behind. Dyumatsena was duly installed once more on his throne and Satyavan was made the crown prince. The other boons that Yama had given to the princess were also fulfilled in course of time. Savitri came to have a hundred brothers and a hundred sons, she and her husband sat on the throne of the Salwas and led a happy life of four hundred years on earth—so says this beautiful legend.

